



# Better To Be **SAFE** Than Sorry: *Emergency Preparedness For Seniors*

**F**or a generation that lived through WWII and The Great Depression, stockpiling rations is not a new concept. For baby boomers, however, the earthquakes and wild fires of California, tsunami in Indonesia and hurricanes that ravaged the Southeast, brought a whole new awareness to emergency preparedness. Unfortunately, for some it was too little, too late. Today, our society is making an effort to bring back some of that “precautionary thinking” and jumpstart our internal fear factor, so that we can better protect those we love in case of an emergency.

Hurricane Katrina’s devastating loss of lives and property brought another serious, but rarely addressed issue to our attention: the safety of our seniors and others living in congregate settings during a natural disaster. Homeland Security, FEMA and others such as the American Red Cross have recently helped to update emergency plans and policies for nursing homes, assisted and independent living communities, hospitals and other healthcare facilities. Identifying “high-risk” older adults should be a priority in an emergency situation.

Older adults who lack the ability to manage activities of daily living without assistance and who lack the families, friends and neighbors to assist them in case of an emergency are considered “high risk”. Their immediate medical needs and food supply should quickly be assessed and addressed by their caregivers. Emergency contact, caregiver designee, and physician information must be kept current in each participant’s file or personal records. It is also critical to be attentive to those individuals who are visually impaired, deaf, or who have mobility or mental health needs. Be aware that people with mental retardation or cognitive impairment may be unable to understand the emergency situation or could become disoriented or confused about the proper way to react.

If we have learned anything from the horrors of recent natural disasters, we have realized that we must give special consideration to medication-dependent people, such as those with heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, epilepsy, Parkinson’s disease, end-stage renal disease and other illnesses. Encourage seniors to keep current records of medications, doctors who care for them and medical conditions. Have copies of their medical insurance and Medicare cards readily available. Keep a list of the style and serial number of medical devices or other life-sustaining devices. Include oper-

ating information and instructions.

In addition, healthcare providers and caregivers must develop contingency plans with local officials for moving people (including those in wheelchairs), emergency supplies and medication. Advise local emergency preparedness organizations of senior transportation equipment that could be quickly mobilized. Devise ways to transport the less mobile using evacuation chairs, canes, walkers and other supportive devices.

Finding a place to take “high risk” older adults is equally important in case of an emergency. Alert emergency management officials about optional service sites, including senior centers, congregate meal sites, and senior housing facilities. For those older adults who still live at home, plan in advance for shelter alternatives that will work for both you and your pets; consider loved ones or friends outside of your immediate area who would be willing to host you and your pets in an emergency.

It is recommended that older adults store at least a 3-day supply of non-perishable food. Foods that do not require refrigeration, preparation, cooking or water are best such as canned soup, fruits, meats and vegetables, peanut butter, crackers, powdered milk and trail mix. If foods must be heated, use a can of Sterno®. Keep a fresh supply of these types of foods on hand don’t forget to replace them frequently.

Store water in clean plastic containers. You should have a 3-day supply of water for each person. Children, nursing mothers and ill people will need more. As a rule, store one gallon of water per day, per family member (2 quarts for drinking, 2 quarts for food preparation/sanitation). Remember to replace water every six months. Your hot water heater is an excellent source of water in case of emergencies. Turn off the power that heats the tank and let it cool to room temperature. Place a container under the tank and open the drain valve. It is a good idea to keep water-disinfecting tablets on hand.

In the past, having a fall out shelter, adequate food and water and an empty trashcan full of blankets, paper products, matches and first aid supplies was a way of life. It was a matter of survival in the minds of a generation that worried about not having enough in times of crisis. Now it’s our turn to prepare for the worst, but hope for the best. It’s certainly better to be safe than sorry.