

Emergency Preparedness Part 1 of 4: Emergency Kits

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A series of articles over the coming months addresses emergency preparation in various ways. This month we start with your emergency kit. Do you have one? Do you know what should be part of one?

Many emergency response organizations - [Cal Fire](#), [CDC](#), [Red Cross](#), [FEMA](#), and others - have information on how to build an emergency kit and what to include. We summarize what those organizations - and others - have to say, and help you prepare the right kit for your situation.

When disaster strikes you need to survive on your own until help arrives. The threats in our area are:

- Earthquake
- Wildland fire
- Terrorist attack in the bay area (unlikely on the mountain itself)
- Disease (something like SARS that spreads rapidly via airborne means)
- Storm / Downed Tree / Mudslide

Even if you are uninjured and your home is undamaged, several of those disasters can result in isolation for a prolonged time due to road closures. Thus, your kit may be needed when you and your family are fine, but cannot get out.

The general rule says you need food, water, shelter, first aid, and everything else to keep you going for at least three days. Most experts suggest seven days is better, and for certain cases - like epidemic disease - two full weeks might be best.

Depending on your situation you may have several different kits:

- A full emergency kit at your home, including everything needed to shelter in place after a serious disaster.
- A go-bag that you can take with you in seconds if you have to evacuate your home quickly.
- A kit in your car, to help you get to shelter in the event that you are not home when disaster strikes.

- A kit in your office, particularly if you carpool or take public transit, so your car kit isn't available to you while you are at work.

Not everyone will need all of those kits, but you should consider what you need given your situation and prepare accordingly. This article focuses on your main, home emergency kit, but provides pointers for other kits as well.

What goes into your kit? At some level people's needs differ: those with medical conditions need their medications, those with babies have different needs from those without, and so on. As a result, your kit will be somewhat unique, but here are some basics that should be in just about every emergency kit:

- **Water** - 1 gallon per person per day for drinking and sanitation (more for nursing mothers, sick people, and in hot climates). Note that counting on your water tank or well may not work. Earthquakes can break pipes and drain tanks. Fires and quakes can knock out power for days, rendering well pumps useless.
- **Food** - non-perishable.
- **Can opener** - if required for the food.
- **Eating utensils** - mess kits, paper cups & plates, plastic forks, spoons & knives, paper towels, etc.
- **First aid kit** - including a guide to basic first aid.
- **Medical gloves**.
- **Flashlight** - and extra batteries.
- **Radio** - battery or crank operated, with extra batteries.
- **Garbage bags** - good sanitation reduces the chances of getting sick.
- **Antibacterial hand wipes or hand sanitizer**.
- **Wrench and/or multi purpose tool** - for turning off propane tank lines or other utilities.
- **Matches** - in waterproof container (or lighter).
- **Whistle** - to signal for help.
- **Cell phone and chargers** - including car charger.
- **Family contact information**.

You may need additional items. Consider:

- **Medications**.
- **Personal hygiene supplies** - toothbrush, toothpaste, hair brush, sanitary pads, toilet paper.
- **Hearing aids** - and extra batteries.
- **Baby supplies** - bottles, formula, food, diapers.
- **Pet food & water** - another gallon of water per day per pet.
- **Pet supplies** - leash & collar, ID, food & water bowl.

- **Water purification system** - to supplement your stored water. See a camping supply store for options. There are also water purification tablets, and a way to kill bacteria in water with bleach (see below.)
- **Maps of the area** - if you need to hike out or drive out on unfamiliar roads after a disaster. Your smartphone maps application will only be as good as the data network after an emergency, but printed maps will always work.
- **Copies of important documents** - health insurance cards, prescriptions, insurance policies, bank account info, passports, birth certificates, deeds, wills, photos of family members for ID purposes, photos of rooms (to help with content identification) etc. All in a waterproof container.
- **Cash** - and credit / debit cards. A stack of quarters can be useful.
- **Sleeping bag(s)** - or blanket(s).
- **Change of clothing** - possibly several, depending on how much time you're planning for.
- **Plain bleach and a medicine dropper** - From FEMA: nine parts water to one part bleach can be used as a disinfectant. In an emergency you can treat water by using 16 drops of liquid bleach per gallon of water. Do not use bleaches that are scented, color safe, or that have added cleaners.
- **Fire extinguisher.**
- **Paper and pencil.**
- **For your kids:** books, games, puzzles, stuffed animal, playing cards.
- **Dust masks** - N95 rated or better.
- **Plastic sheeting and duct tape** - to shelter in place and keep dust or other contaminants out of a house or room.
- **Towels.**
- **Work gloves.**
- **Scissors and/or utility knife.**
- **Old style corded phone** - one that will still work when the power is down. This assumes you still have an actual, POTS, land line. Anyone using VOIP or other digital technology may not be able to use these. They may also fail once the battery in a cable phone modem runs down.
- **Extra set of car & house keys.**
- **Rain gear.**
- **Glow sticks** - for emergency lighting and kids to play with.
- **Family pictures** - the ones you would take if you had 10 minutes to evacuate your house.
- **PC hard drives** - at least have a backup you can grab in case your computer is destroyed.
- **Walkie talkies.**
- **Tarp.**
- **Rope.**
- **Spare eyeglasses.**
- **Sunscreen.**

These suggestions all come from reputable sites. As you can see, keeping a two week supply of everything you might need is a big task, and could require a lot of space. You have to choose what is required in your case.

Where should you keep your kit? Consider the possible disasters listed above:

- **Earthquake & mudslide** - If your home is standing and safe to access, your kit can be just about anywhere in or around it. If, however, your home is unsafe to enter or destroyed, having your kit inside it means you don't have one anymore. In this case, keeping your kit somewhere outside the house - in a car, shed, or secure external storage - makes sense.
- **Wildland fire** - If you evacuate due to a fire, you may or may not have time to gather the needed items from your kit to take with you. A go-bag style kit is useful in this case, and can be kept somewhere quickly accessible. If you don't evacuate but instead are just cut off in your home, without power or a way out, your kit can be anywhere around your home.
- **Terrorist attack, disease, & storm related isolation issues** - in these cases if you are home your kit can probably be anywhere handy.

Clearly the challenge in our area is earthquakes and other things that damage or destroy our homes. Keeping your kit somewhere accessible if your home is seriously damaged is important. Some people keep them in storage sheds or metal garbage cans outside. You will have to assess your needs and risks, and store your kit in a safe and accessible place.

Car / Office Kits and Go-Bags:

A car emergency kit can't contain everything a home kit would, but it should have some things to help if you are away from home: water & food, change of clothing and shoes, flashlight, whistle, a simple first aid kit, essential medicines, and possibly a backpack to carry these things. You may have additional specific needs, and if so add those items.

An office emergency kit is much like a car kit. Things needed to enable you to get to safety, find help, or get home. If you drive to work, your car kit will help if you can get to it (see the tips section below). If you take public transit to work, however, consider keeping a more complete kit under your desk.

This is the kit to grab when you need to evacuate. It should contain the things you will take if you have just a few minutes to leave. You'll want medications, copies of your insurance forms, identification papers, your phone list, critical prescriptions, and so on. You might keep a backup of your important computer files on a thumb drive stored here. Obviously if you have more time you can pack more carefully and take more things, but consider a go-bag, your wallet and car keys the bare minimum you need to get by in an immediate evacuation.

Store your Go-Bag in an easy-to-find place, perhaps a closet near your front door.

Tips:

- Review your kits regularly and use items close to their expiration expiration dates, replacing them as needed.
- Large pest-proof, plastic, pet food storage bins are good options to keep your kit in.
- Keep a flashlight, shoes, whistle, and leather gloves under your bed and in your office so you can get to safety after a major disaster. Some people suggest a hard hat too.
- Give the gift of preparedness. Consider building a car kit for your spouse or child.
- Some partial emergency kits can be purchased online from [the Red Cross](#) or [Home Depot](#).
- FEMA has [tips on how to prepare and store clean water](#) if you don't want to purchase bottled water.

Building an emergency kit is like saving money for retirement. It may seem like a lot of trouble, and you could be doing fun things instead, but later you will be glad you did it.