

Survival: What to Pack in a 72-hour Kit

Looking for the latest? We've checked this page to make sure everything is up to date. We still think these are great tips for building a 72-hour kit.

Occasionally, Mother Nature likes to remind us who's really in charge. Where once I was in the "it won't happen to me" crowd, I now find myself deep in emergency preparedness research and preparation, and I've found that packing a 72-hour kit ranks atop most emergency preparedness plans.

But how do you pack effectively and what exactly should you be packing? In this 72-hour kit checklist, we explore questions you should consider prior to packing and break down your pack into **things you need**, **things you'll want**, and what's **nice to have** in an emergency. You can also take a look at premade 72-hour kits you can buy [here](#) and then consider what you want to add to them.

What to ask yourself before you pack your 72-hour survival kit

Consider your family's situation. How many people are in your family? Does anyone in your family need special consideration? Allergies? Medicine? Do you have an infant? All of these things will determine what you want to pack in your 72-hour survival kit. Keep in mind that your pack should be as minimal as possible—the more you pack, the heavier your 72-hour kit will be.

Only pack what you can realistically carry in an emergency situation.

What you absolutely need in your 72-hour kit

Every 72-hour kit should be catered to the owner's individual needs. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to putting a pack together; however, the base needs are the same. These items are things that you cannot go without in your 72-hour kit.

- Water
- Non-perishable food
- Fixed-blade knife
- Flashlight
- Waterproof lighter or matches

- Sleeping bag or blankets
- First aid kit
- Medication
- Cash
- Change of clothes

PRINTABLE CHECKLIST AT BOTTOM OF ARTICLE

Water and non-perishable food

Water. Water should be #1 on the list for every 72-hour kit; it is the most basic and most important thing you need to survive. However, storing enough water for you and your family quickly becomes a problem. The [recommended amount of drinking water](#) is **one gallon per day per person**. One gallon of water weighs 8.34 pounds, so if you're like me and packing for a family of three, 72 hours worth of water becomes 75 pounds of water—not exactly realistic to carry.

Instead, we recommend packing three one-liter bottles of drinking water per person (6.6 pounds per person) and getting a [LifeStraw Personal Water Filter](#) to add to your backpack. LifeStraw removes 99.99% of waterborne bacteria and protozoa from any water source and can filter **up to 1,000 liters (264 gallons)** of contaminated water per filter.

We should clarify that this reduced water recommendation is strictly for limiting the weight of your 72-hour kit if you need to evacuate. In many emergency situations, you will not have to evacuate your home and may simply be without power or running water. We recommend storing the maximum amount of drinking water—at least one gallon per person for three days—in your home food storage. Only for emergencies where you need to evacuate do we recommend reducing water weight.

Non-perishable food. Don't just get non-perishable food; look for “non-cook” items for your survival pack, as well. You don't want to have to rely on a stove, fire, or any other cooking mechanism in an emergency situation. If you don't have to cook, you don't need cooking supplies, which means you can save space—and more importantly, weight—in your pack.

You need enough food for three meals per day per person for three days. Remember, these meals are meant to help you survive, but you should pack items that you know you and your family will actually eat, especially if you're packing for a small child. We suggest packing any of the following non-perishable, non-cook food items:

- **Crackers/cereal**
- **Trail mix/dried fruit**
- **Granola bars**
- **Canned beans, meat, tuna, Chef Boyardee**—Avoid “pop-top” cans. These can leak or explode in your pack.

To see pack-friendly items like those above, go [here](#).

Gear and equipment

Backpack. One of the more common mistakes for 72-hour kits starts with the backpack. Choose a backpack that has multiple compartments in which you can divide your survival gear. Sifting through an unorganized pack, where everything is jumbled into the same large compartment can be frustrating and time consuming. By subdividing your stuff into different pockets you can access what you need quickly. Amazon has a variety of [military-style packs](#) to choose from.

Can opener. Since you're packing canned food (no "pop-tops"), you'll need a way to get into the cans. This might be part of a Leatherman tool, like [this one from Amazon](#), or a separate can opener, it's up to you.

Knife. Many people will pack a Leatherman tool and call it good, but we suggest having multiple cutting tools in case one is misplaced or doesn't work for the job. Having a knife with a large, fixed, non-foldable blade, may come in handy if you find yourself needing to cut through large items or cut for a long time. Check Amazon prices on the [MTech MT-086](#).

Flashlight. Make sure to pack a durable, lightweight flashlight. Check Amazon prices on the [Fenix E12](#).

Emergency two-way radio. Keeping yourself informed and having the ability to communicate during an emergency is invaluable. Amazon has countless options on affordable two-way radios like this [Midland GXT1050VP4](#) with a 36-mile range. We really like this model because it also works as a NOAA weather radio and automatically scans for weather alerts.

BiC Lighter. We don't recommend lighting fires in the aftermath of a disaster because you never know if a gas line has been damaged and may be leaking. However, every disaster situation is different and you may find yourself in need of a fire. Add a few [BiC lighter's](#) to your pack, in case you need to build a fire.

We recommend a BiC lighter over waterproof matches for a [number of reasons](#), mostly because they can start thousands of fire, don't add much weight to your pack, and can still be used to create a spark long after the fuel runs out. Matches are virtually weightless, so you can still throw them in as a backup if you prefer.

Extra batteries. All of your emergency electronics need power, and 72 hours is a long time to go between charges. Make sure to have an ample supply of backup batteries for your flashlights, radios, and any other emergency electronics you decide to pack. You might even consider ordering a [solar charger](#) from Amazon for your phone.

Gloves. You'll need to do most everything by hand in an emergency situation so you want to make sure you have good protective gloves to keep from getting splinters or blisters. Gloves can also be used to sheathe a pair of scissors or other sharp utensils you may have in your pack.

Tent. It's important to know that a two-man tent probably won't fit two people and their packs, especially if you want to be comfortable. You'll probably only need one tent for the entire family, but you need to plan for its size accordingly. If you have four people in your family, we suggest going with a 6–8 person tent so you'll have room for everyone and their packs. Also, make sure to store your packs inside the tent at all times. You don't want bugs or other animals getting into them.

Poncho. Like many other items in your survival kit, ponchos are a versatile survival item that can be used for [more than just the obvious](#). We suggest finding a quality poncho made from rip-resistant nylon, rather than going for a cheap plastic version. Something like [like this](#) is a relatively cheap option on Amazon.

Blankets. Blankets have [multiple uses](#) and you'll definitely want to have one in your 72-hour kit. We really like these [Mylar thermal blankets](#) on Amazon.

Personal supplies

First aid supplies. First aid kits are essential to have in an emergency, and there are tons of premade options available on Amazon. We like [this one](#), since it has all the essential medical supplies and is relatively inexpensive.

Medications. Make sure to cover the basics to deal with pain, in case you or someone in your family is injured during the emergency. Acetaminophen, ibuprofen, children's medication, any other personal medication prescribed (enough for three days).

Toiletries. Toilet paper, toothbrush/toothpaste (travel size), feminine hygiene products, contact solution (travel size), etc.

Dust mask. The likelihood of dust and debris is high in any emergency situation. Make sure to have some dust masks in your pack to protect your lungs. You can get a [15-Pack](#) on Amazon for super cheap.

Change of clothes. Because we can never know when a disaster will hit, be sure to pack a change of clothes for each season. A pair of shorts doesn't do you any good in the dead of winter; likewise, a heavy sweater will make you overheat in summer months.

Underwear. This is a given; plus, your mom will be proud you remembered a clean pair.

Cash. Depending on the disaster, your credit cards may not work. Keep enough cash on you to survive for a week. Other valuables to have:

- Credit card
- Prepaid phone card

Infant needs. If you have an infant you'll need to pack all the necessary items like diapers, wipes, formula, medications specific to the infant, etc.

What you'll probably want in your 72-hour kit

This is where you start to differentiate each survival pack based on who it's for. Most of these items may seem like "cannot go without" items but depending on your pack, these are things you could theoretically live without—but probably don't want to—for 72 hours.

Dishes/utensils. Cup, plate, knife, fork, spoon set. Check Amazon prices for something like [this camping mess kit](#) that works great for a pack. Some people prefer to go minimalist on utensil sets, but with a lightweight set we prefer to not go without.

Rope. Most sites suggest carrying 50 feet of rope but we've found that a [1-inch polypro cam strap](#) actually has the same load capacity and can be stored much easier. Amazon lets you choose the length up to 20 feet.

Duct tape. Duct tape seems to be the fix-all solution, and it really is valuable in all sorts of situations. Check out some useful [duct tape survival tips](#).

Whistle. An emergency whistle will allow you to signal for help, alerting relief parties to your whereabouts.

Hatchet. Hatchets provide multiple uses beyond chopping wood. Here are [six unique survival uses](#) for your hatchet. This [hatchet on Amazon](#) is a great utility tool for your 72-hour kit.

Sleeping bag. Sleeping bags present an interesting size and weight problem and for that they've landed on our "probably want" list. You can make do without one by wrapping yourself in multiple thermal blankets, or Amazon sells an awesome [Tummah Emergency Survival Mylar Thermal Sleeping Bag](#) that weighs less than 4 ounces. It's not as comfortable as a big fluffy sleeping bag but it's light and will keep you warm at night.

Sheets. Cloth and plastic sheets can come in handy for ground-cloths, tablecloths, bandaging, food covers, etc.

Shovel. A shovel is another multipurpose tool that comes in handy in a pinch. A military folding shovel, like [this one](#) from Amazon, lets you dig, saw, chop, cut, pick, pry, hammer, and even open bottles. And it even folds so you can carry it easily.

Bug repellant. Insects are ever-present in the aftermath of disasters. Pack some bug spray to protect yourself from irritating bites, painful stings, and bug-carried diseases.

Disposable camera. A disposable camera will allow you to document the damage done to your home so you can later report it to the insurance company. Don't rely on your phone camera for this valuable documentation since it may lose battery or be damaged in the event.

What's nice to have but not necessary in your 72-hour survival kit

Copies of legal documents. Birth/marriage certificate, wills, passports, identification.

- Copy of vaccination papers
- Copy of insurance policies

Playing cards. Because in all likelihood, you'll do a lot of sitting and waiting.

Gum. Chewing sugarless gum after a meal can [help prevent tooth decay](#). Watch out for mint-flavored gum. The mint can seep into other items in your pack and flavor them. Nobody wants minty granola bars.

Pen and paper. An emergency isn't something we are used to dealing with and some emergencies might have strange or complicated information that you will want to write down and remember. Information like addresses, milepost number, emergency contacts, etc.

Powdered Gatorade. This is a great way to rehydrate and add some flavor to your drinking water, especially if you are purifying your water with a LifeStraw.

Just because your 72-hour kit is packed, doesn't mean you're prepared

Being prepared means you need to test your survival kit. Testing your 72-hour kit is one of the most important parts of emergency preparation. There are countless blogs with opinions on what to pack in your kit, but few mention testing them. Testing your kit periodically—once every 6–12 months—will ensure you're familiar with your gear and let you solve any issues before they become real problems.

What if you forgot to add a change of clothes? Or you find out that the recommended pocket-knife actually sucks? Testing your kit gives you an opportunity to find what you've missed and make tweaks that will improve its usefulness. If you packed for an infant but now have a toddler, your needs are going to change. Also, take this chance to check battery life, switch out expired food items, and update your 72-hour kit, as needed.

Other things to consider

Immunizations up to date. Make sure you keep your immunizations up to date annually. Disasters cause all sorts of injuries and health concerns, and you want to keep yourself protected from any illnesses you might encounter.

Young children. We mentioned infants earlier, but toddlers and young children can create unique challenges. Consider your children's ages and personal needs and plan accordingly.

Do you know how to use all of your equipment? This will fall in line with your semi-annual kit testing, but make sure you understand and can use every item in your pack as it's intended and more.

Pets. Pets are like children and you need to plan for their specific needs as well.

Organization. A neat, organized pack goes a long way to relieve stress in an emergency. Being able to find what you need as quickly as possible is a must.

It's time to prepare

Now, imagine you're back in your house. You crawl out from under your dining room table, shaken and surrounded by what's left of your now shattered chandelier. Emergency notifications are blowing up your phone and in the distance sirens signal that rescue and recovery efforts are underway. But as you look over the jagged, chalky sheetrock that was once your living room wall, you realize you've got a long road ahead. You grab your 72-hour kit and begin searching for a safe place to wait it out until help arrives.

What's happened in Japan and Ecuador is both sad and eye-opening, and though my heart goes out to the people of Kumamoto and Muisne, I'm grateful for the opportunity to disembark the "It won't happen to me" boat, and prepare for a possible emergency scenario closer to home.



72-Hour Survival Kit Essentials

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| ☐ Water: one gallon per person per day | ☐ Waterproof lighter and matches |
| ☐ Water purification tablets or filter | ☐ Waterproof tent |
| ☐ Non-perishable food | ☐ Ponchos |
| ☐ Hiking backpack | ☐ Blankets or sleeping bags |
| ☐ Can opener | ☐ First aid kit |
| ☐ Fixed-blade knife | ☐ Change of clothes |
| ☐ Lightweight LED flashlight | ☐ Cash for power outages |