

Emergency Preparedness Means Medical Preparedness for Seniors

by Eileen Beal

Emergency preparedness—whether for a natural disaster, terror strike or power outage—has moved front and center in most American’s minds.

For the majority of people, being prepared for an emergency or natural disaster means having a 40-quart plastic storage box sitting out in the garage loaded with: milk jugs full of water; high-energy food; first aid supplies and a first aid manual; blankets or sleeping bags; emergency tools (everything from a manual can opener to a collapsible shovel); copies of insurance and medical cards; and duplicate credit cards, a roll of quarters, and cash in small denomination bills.

For those in their 70s and 80s, who are very likely to be alone when an emergency or disaster hits, a kit should definitely include the above items. But, says Dr. James Campbell, chairman of the Department of Family Medicine and Geriatrics at Cleveland’s MetroHealth System, it should also include things that are going to enable older adults—whether they are alone, camped out at a motel with family members, or in a sweltering shelter with hundreds of strangers—to deal with their highly individualized health problems.

Disaster’s impact on the elderly

Most older adults have chronic conditions—heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, hypertension, glaucoma, etc.—that make it extremely difficult to maintain health during a disaster or in an emergency situation, says Dr. Campbell.

That’s because, he explains, “They usually have more than one condition, so they are going to be taking a lot of medications to manage things, and to manage all the medications’ side effects, they [the medications] usually have to be taken on some kind of strict, daily schedule.”

“Things can become even more complicated,” he adds, “if they [older adults] are also dealing with significant cognitive decline.”

Older adults’ unique needs mean that, besides the items listed above, their emergency kit must also include:

Medications and/or medical devices. There should be at least 3 days worth of everything—prescription medications, commonly used over-the-counter pills, medical equipment and supplies (i.e. insulin syringes, ostomy bags, incontinence pads, etc.)—the person needs and/or uses on a daily basis. And, says Dr. Campbell, “All the medications should be updated—so they aren’t out of date—periodically.”

A medications list. This list/card should have the brand name and generic name of each medication; the timing and dosage for each one; information on any special dietary needs or allergies; medical insurance and Medicare numbers; and the names, specialties, and phone numbers of all physicians. “When things are written down,” explains Dr. Campbell, “even if they can’t remember—due to simple confusion or cognitive decline—what they are taking or who their doctor is...the safety and disaster forces people will have a way to get the information they need from them.”

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Identification information. A full-face photograph with the person's name and age. "An ID bracelet would be even better," says Dr. Campbell.

A contact list. This should give the names of as many people in their social support web as possible—adult children, hired caregivers, doctor, hospital (for medical records), social worker, religious advisor, friends. And it should include both phone and cell phone numbers.

If they use them, extra eyeglasses, dentures, and/or hearing aid batteries should also be included.

Each person's medications and information should be in a special kit—a tote bag or backpack with their name on it—says Dr. Campbell. "Hung on a hook by the door," he adds, "it's ready to grab and go."

But dealing with current medication needs isn't the only thing to keep in mind if there is a disaster that requires evacuation.

Aging causes a decline in the robustness of the immune system, explains Dr. Campbell. "That leaves older adults more at-risk for the kinds of diseases and infections that can come with a disaster," he adds, "and puts them are more at risk for dehydration, too."

In addition, says Dr. Campbell, older people are more severely impacted by the physical, emotional and psychological stresses that come with an emergency situation. For example, someone who is 75 and experiences the fear, panic, anxiety and exhaustion of a natural disaster—even if they are with family—is going to come through the situation in much worse shape than someone half that age.

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Eileen Beal, MA, is a freelance healthcare writer specializing in issues that impact older adults.. Successful Aging is provided by Benjamin Rose (www.benrose.org), a non-profit social service agency for older adults.

Sources and Resources

For the Red Cross's suggestions for preparing a disaster preparedness kit, go to:

www.redcross.org/services/disaster/beprepared/apendixa.html.

For the National Institute of Health's suggestions and related information, go to:

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/print/disasterandemergencypreparedness.htm.)

For information on local emergency preparedness and disaster relief resources specifically aimed at seniors, order a free copy of Older Adults: The Resource Guide from the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging, 216-621-8010