

Be heart-smart to stay safe and healthy during and after natural disasters

23 June 2022



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June is the start of hurricane season in the U.S., and as you're making your emergency preparedness checklist, the American Heart Association cautions that it's also important to protect your heart and overall health in the wake of a hurricane or other natural disaster.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is predicting an above-average Atlantic Ocean [hurricane](#) season for the seventh year in a row. Scientific research shows it's not only physical devastation that impacts the health and safety of people in the path of a hurricane or other natural disaster.

- In a [small study presented at the American Heart Association's Epidemiology, Prevention, Lifestyle and Cardiometabolic Health 2021 Scientific Sessions](#), researchers found that among people who survived Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico in 2017, there were higher rates of high blood pressure, obesity and pre-diabetes, as well as increased incidences of [heart](#) disease and stroke two years after the storm

compared to two years prior to the hurricane.

- Twelve years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, heart attack rates in affected areas increased by nearly five times, according to a [study presented at the American Heart Association's Scientific Sessions 2019](#). Researchers noted that psychosocial, behavioral and traditional cardiovascular disease risk factors also increased significantly in the decade after the storm.
- Authors of a [study published in the Journal of the American Heart Association](#) calculated that in the areas of New Jersey most impacted by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, there were 125 more heart attacks, 36 additional strokes and 70 more deaths in the two weeks after the 2012 storm compared to the same time period from the previous five years.

It's not only hurricanes that can have a negative impact on cardiovascular health. There has been much [scientific research](#) on health among people affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2012. A [study published in the American Heart Association journal, Hypertension](#), found a significant increase in blood pressure levels and the incidence of high blood pressure among people who were forced to evacuate following that disaster.

Gustavo E. Flores, M.D., a member of the American Heart Association's Emergency Cardiovascular Care committee, says there are several factors that may lead to increased cardiovascular disease and risk after a hurricane or other natural disaster.

"During and after a storm, many people experience [extreme stress](#) and trauma, which research shows can lead to an increase in cardiovascular disease risk. The impact can be more intense for heart

disease and stroke patients," he said. "Additionally, in the aftermath of a significant natural disaster, property destruction and evacuations affect many basic support resources. This can make it challenging to see a health care professional for routine check-ups or to refill or adjust medications, especially for more vulnerable populations."

Flores, chairman and chief instructor for Emergency & Critical Care Trainings, LLC, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, says it's important for people to be prepared and plan ahead. The American Heart Association's [Disaster Resources page](#) includes a wide range of helpful information.

In addition, here are some quick tips:

- Take time now to write down any [medical conditions](#), allergies and medications, including doses and the time you take medications, along with your pharmacy name, address and phone number. Keep the information with any other "go-kit" items you have handy for quick evacuation.
- If you do need to evacuate, even temporarily, bring your medications and your health information with you in a resealable plastic bag to help keep it dry.
- If your medication is lost, damaged by water or was left behind when you evacuated, research open pharmacies and seek a refill as quickly as possible.
- Some states allow pharmacists to make medically necessary exceptions on certain types of prescription refills during an emergency. Information on all state emergency prescription refill laws is available [here](#).
- Use the AHA's [Patient Preparedness Plan](#) if you have diabetes and use insulin. There you'll find a checklist of supplies and for guidelines on how to prepare for an emergency.

Another way to prepare ahead for a possible medical emergency is to learn how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and how to use an automated external defibrillator (AED) until help arrives. If performed correctly, CPR can double or triple a person's chance of survival. You

could be saving the life of someone you love. A simple, [one-minute video](#) shows you what you need to know to perform Hands Only CPR.

Provided by American Heart Association

APA citation: Be heart-smart to stay safe and healthy during and after natural disasters (2022, June 23) retrieved 4 December 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-06-heart-smart-safe-healthy-natural-disasters.html>

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