

Disaster Preparedness for Pets

Hurricanes, floods, wildfires, hazardous material spills—disasters can strike anytime, anywhere. If you think you will never have to evacuate unless you live in a flood plain, near an earthquake fault line or in a coastal area, you may be tragically mistaken. It is imperative that you make preparations to evacuate your family and your pets in any situation. In the event of a disaster, proper preparation will pay off with the safety of your family and pets.

If You Evacuate, Take Your Pets

The single most important thing you can do to protect your pets is to take them with you when you evacuate. Animals left behind in a disaster can easily be injured, lost, or killed. Animals left inside your home can escape through storm-damaged areas, such as broken windows. Animals turned loose to fend for themselves are likely to become victims of exposure, starvation, predators, contaminated food or water, or accidents. Leaving dogs tied or chained outside in a disaster is a death sentence.

- If you leave, even if you think you may be gone only for a few hours, take your animals. Once you leave, you have no way of knowing how long you'll be kept out of the area, and you may not be able to go back for your pets.
- Leave early—don't wait for a mandatory evacuation order. An unnecessary trip is far better than waiting too long to leave safely with your pets. If you wait to be evacuated by emergency officials, you may be told to leave your pets behind.

Don't Forget ID

Your pets should be wearing up-to-date identification at all times. It's a good idea to include the phone number of a friend or relative outside your immediate area—if your pet is lost, you'll want to provide a number on the tag that will be answered even if you're out of your home.

Find a Safe Place Ahead of Time

Because evacuation shelters generally don't accept pets (except for service animals), you must plan ahead to ensure that your family and pets will have a safe place to stay. Don't wait until disaster strikes to do your research.

- Contact hotels and motels outside your immediate area to check policies on accepting pets. Ask about any restrictions on number, size, and species. Ask if "no pet" policies would be waived in an emergency. Make a list of pet-friendly places and keep it handy. Call ahead for a reservation as soon as you think you might have to leave your home.
- Check with friends, relatives, or others outside your immediate area. Ask if they would be able to shelter you and your animals or just your animals, if necessary. If you have more than one pet, you may have to be prepared to house them separately.
- Make a list of boarding facilities and veterinary offices that might be able to shelter animals in emergencies; include 24-hour telephone numbers.
- Ask your local animal shelter if it provides foster care or shelter for pets in an emergency. This should be your last resort, as shelters have limited resources and are likely to be stretched to their limits during an emergency.

If You Don't Evacuate

If your family and pets must wait out a storm or other disaster at home, identify a safe area of your home where you can all stay together.

- Keep dogs on leashes and cats in carriers, and make sure they are wearing identification.
- Have any medications and a supply of pet food and water inside watertight containers, along with your other emergency supplies.

As the Disaster Approaches

Don't wait until the last minute to get ready. Warnings of hurricanes or other disasters may be issued hours, or even days, in advance.

- Call to confirm emergency shelter arrangements for you and your pets.
- Bring pets into the house and confine them so you can leave with them quickly if necessary. Make sure each pet and pet carrier has up-to-date identification and contact information. Include information about your temporary shelter location.

Make sure your disaster supplies are ready to go, including your pet disaster kit.

In Case You're Not Home

An evacuation order may come, or a disaster may strike, when you're at work or out of the house.

- Make arrangements well in advance for a trusted neighbor to take your pets and meet you at a specified location. Be sure the person is comfortable with your pets, knows where your animals are likely to be, knows where your disaster supplies are kept, and has a key to your home.

If you use a pet-sitting service, it may be able to help, but discuss the possibility well in advance.

After the Storm

Planning and preparation will help you weather the disaster, but your home may be a very different place afterward, whether you have taken shelter at home or elsewhere.

- Don't allow your pets to roam loose. Familiar landmarks and smells might be gone, and your pet will probably be disoriented. Pets can easily get lost in such situations.
- For a few days, keep dogs on leashes and keep cats in carriers inside the house. If your house is damaged, they could escape and become lost.
- Be patient with your pets after a disaster. Try to get them back into their normal routines as soon as possible, and be ready for behavioral problems that may result from the stress of the situation. If behavioral problems persist, or if your pet seems to be having any health problems, talk to your veterinarian.

Evacuation Planning:

You may not be in a flood zone or have to flee wildfire, but even a hazardous material incident on a nearby street could force you to evacuate. It pays to be prepared!

Disaster Supply Checklist for Pets

Every member of your family should know what he or she needs to take when you evacuate. You also need to prepare supplies for your pet. Stock up on nonperishables well ahead of time, add perishable items at the last minute, and have everything ready to go at a moment's notice. Keep everything accessible, stored in sturdy containers (duffel bags, covered trash containers, etc.) that can be carried easily.

In your disaster kit, you should include:

- Medications and medical records stored in a waterproof container and a first aid kit. A pet first aid book is also good to include.
- Sturdy leashes, harnesses, and carriers to transport pets safely and to ensure that your pets can't escape. Carriers should be large enough for the animal to stand comfortably, turn around, and lie down. Your pet may have to stay in the carrier for hours at a time while you have taken shelter away from home. Be sure to have a secure cage with no loose objects inside it to accommodate smaller pets. These may require blankets or towels for bedding and warmth, and other special items.
- Current photos and descriptions of your pets to help others identify them in case you and your pets become separated and to prove that they are yours.
- Food and water for at least three days for each pet, bowls, cat litter and litter box, and a manual can opener.
- Information on feeding schedules, medical conditions, behavior problems, and the name and number of your veterinarian in case you have to board your pets or place them in foster care.
- Pet beds and toys, if you can easily take them, to reduce stress.

Other useful items include newspapers, paper towels, plastic trash bags, grooming items, and household bleach.

Other Evacuation Tips

- All mobile home residents should evacuate at the first sign of a disaster.
- Evacuate to the safest location you can that's as close as possible to home. Long-distance evacuation can be a problem when highways are crowded.
- When planning for hurricanes, identify your evacuation zone and level to determine if and when you would have to evacuate. Be prepared for one category higher than the one being forecast, because hurricanes often increase in strength just before making landfall.
- Your local humane organization or local emergency management agency may be able to provide you with information about your community's disaster response plans.