USA Survival Guide: Getting Started

A Free Guide to Your First Steps in Emergency Preparedness

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Important: This guide gives general preparedness information for households in the United States. It is not a substitute for instructions from emergency officials, first responders, doctors, or other qualified professionals. In an emergency, call 911 and follow the directions of your local officials. The facts in it were checked against official sources in October 2026. The author and publisher are not responsible for any injury, loss, or damage that results from using or misusing the information in this guide.

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Welcome

This free guide is a starting point. It pulls the most useful pages from my book, USA Survival Guide: the first steps to take this week, the basics of storing water, a starter kit list, the alert words to know, the safety rules worth knowing by heart, and the pages for a family contact plan. When you see a chapter number in these pages, it means a chapter of the full book.

Everything here was checked against official sources, such as Ready.gov, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Weather Service (NWS), in October 2026.

What "survival" really means

When people hear the word "survival," they often picture something out of a movie. That's not what this book is about. For most of us, survival means getting through a bad few days without getting hurt, getting sick, or losing more than we have to.

Most emergencies are local and short. A storm knocks out power for a day or two. A water main breaks and your town is told to boil water. A wildfire or a chemical spill forces part of a county to leave home for a while. These events are serious, but they usually end, and life goes back to normal.

The catch is the gap between the moment trouble starts and the moment help reaches you. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) puts it simply on its Ready.gov site: after an emergency, you may need to survive on your own for several days. Firefighters, police, utility crews, and relief groups do amazing work, but in a big event they have a lot of people to reach. The first days are often on you.

That's the whole point of getting ready. If your household can take care of itself for a while, the people who respond can focus on the neighbors who truly can't.

You might ask, "Isn't this a lot of worry over things that may never happen?" It's simple: getting ready is not about worry. It's about having a flashlight that works, water in the closet, and a plan everyone knows, so that when the lights go out, you're annoyed instead of afraid.

A calm mindset

The most useful thing you can bring to an emergency is a steady head. Being prepared helps with that. When you already know what to do, you spend less energy on panic and more on the next right step.

In an emergency, start with the basics. Get yourself and your family away from immediate danger. Call 911 if someone is hurt or in danger. Then get information from a trusted source before you act on rumors.

> **Caution:** If someone is hurt, trapped, or in danger, call 911 first. This book can help you get ready, but it is not a replacement for emergency responders.

Follow official instructions first

When local officials tell you to evacuate, shelter in place, or boil your water, do it. They can see things you can't: the river gauge upstream, the path of the fire, the wind direction carrying a chemical cloud. If the officials say leave, leave.

This book gives you general guidance that works in most places. Your local emergency management office, fire department, and the National Weather Service (NWS) know your area. When their instructions differ from what you read here, follow theirs.

Start This Week

Reading a whole book about emergencies can feel like a lot. So don't try to do it all at once. If you only do three things this week, make them these.

Step 1: Sign up for local alerts

Find out how your city or county sends emergency alerts and sign up. Many counties and cities run their own alert services that you sign up for. In California, for example, the state's Office of Emergency Services says every county offers free emergency alerts, and it urges people to sign up in the county where they live, the county where they work, or both. A quick search for your county name plus "emergency alerts" usually finds it, or call your county's emergency management office. Chapter 6 covers every kind of alert in detail.

Step 2: Store some water

Ready.gov recommends at least one gallon of water per person per day for several days, for drinking and sanitation. Start with what you can. A few cases of store-bought bottled water on a closet floor is a fine beginning. Store it in a cool, dark place. If you fill your own containers, use food-grade ones and replace that water every six months. Chapter 3 covers water in depth, including how to make water safe to drink.

Step 3: Make a family contact plan

Write down the phone numbers that matter: family members, a friend or relative who lives out of the area, your doctor, your kids' school. Many of us couldn't dial our own family members' numbers without our phones. Put a copy in every wallet, backpack, and purse. Then agree on where your household will meet if you can't get home or can't reach each other. Chapter 2 walks you through the whole plan.

> **Tip:** Put a reminder on your calendar for one week from today: "Alerts, water, contact plan." Checking off three small things builds more readiness than reading ten articles.

Build it a little at a time

You don't need to buy everything this month. In fact, I'd rather you didn't. Most of what you need is already in your home: flashlights, blankets, canned food, a first aid kit, a backpack. Gather it in one place first, then fill the gaps.

A good habit is to add one or two items each time you shop: a gallon of water, an extra can of beans, a pack of batteries. In a few months you'll have a solid supply without a big bill. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show you what to aim for.

Skip the gadgets you don't know how to use. A plain flashlight you can find in the dark beats a fancy tool still in its box.

Water: The First Thing to Store

Ready.gov, the federal government's preparedness website run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), says a normally active person needs about three quarters of a gallon of fluid each day from water and other drinks. It also says children, nursing mothers and sick people may need more, and that in very hot temperatures water needs can double.

Water problems come in more shapes than people expect. Your tap might stop running. Or it might keep running but not be safe, because floodwater got into the system, a pipe broke, or the treatment plant lost power. In either case, the water you stored ahead of time is the water you can trust.

How much water to store

Ready.gov says to store at least one gallon of water per person per day for several days, for drinking and sanitation. Sanitation means keeping clean: washing hands, brushing teeth, and keeping your home and toilet area clean so germs don't spread.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) gives a little more detail. CDC says to store at least 1 gallon per person, per day for 3 days, and to try to store a 2-week supply if possible. CDC also says to store more for pregnant women, people who are sick, pets, and for anyone who lives in a hot climate.

You might ask, "Do I really need two weeks of water?" It's simple: three days gets you through most short emergencies, and two weeks covers the bigger ones, when water systems can take longer to fix. Start with three days. Then keep adding.

Quick math for your household

Household	3 days (1 gallon per person per day)	2 weeks (1 gallon per person per day)
1 person	3 gallons	14 gallons
2 people	6 gallons	28 gallons
4 people	12 gallons	56 gallons
6 people	18 gallons	84 gallons

Add more for anyone who is pregnant, nursing, sick or living in a hot place, and add water for each pet. Chapter 5 lists CDC's pet kit guidance, which calls for a 2-week supply of water for each animal.

> **Caution:** Ready.gov says never ration drinking water unless officials tell you to. Drink what you need today, and look for more for tomorrow. You can cut down how much you need by staying cool and resting.

Ready.gov also says not to drink carbonated or caffeinated drinks instead of water. Caffeinated drinks and alcohol dehydrate the body, which raises your need for water.

Storing water safely

The easiest option: store-bought bottled water

Ready.gov says the simplest choice is to buy commercially bottled water and keep it in its sealed original container in a cool, dark place. CDC says to observe the expiration date on store-bought water.

Filling your own containers

Filling your own containers is cheaper, and it is how many families build up to two weeks. CDC says it is best to use food-grade water storage containers approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Food-grade means the container is made of material that is safe for holding food or drink. CDC notes that surplus and camping stores often carry them.

If you can't get a food-grade container, CDC says to choose one that has a top that closes tightly and is made of durable, unbreakable material, not glass.

Caution: Never store drinking water in a container that once held toxic chemicals, such as bleach or pesticides. CDC is clear on this. No amount of rinsing makes those containers safe.

How to clean and sanitize a container

Before you fill a container, clean it and sanitize it. Sanitize means to kill most of the germs left on a surface. CDC gives these steps:

1. Wash the container and its cap with soap and water, then rinse completely with water.
2. Mix a sanitizing solution of 1 teaspoon of unscented liquid household chlorine bleach in 1 quart (4 cups) of water. Use bleach that contains 5% to 9% sodium hypochlorite (the active ingredient listed on the label).
3. Pour the solution into the container, cover it tightly, and shake it well so the solution touches all inside surfaces.
4. Wait at least 30 seconds, then pour the solution out.
5. Let the empty container air-dry before you use it.
6. Fill it with clean tap water from a safe supply and cover it with a tight lid.
7. Label it "drinking water" and write the date you filled it.

Where and how long to store it

CDC says to keep stored water in a place with a cool temperature, between 50 and 70 degrees F, out of direct sunlight, and away from toxic substances such as gasoline or pesticides. A closet, a spot under the bed, or a basement corner away from the furnace and the paint cans all work. A hot garage next to the lawn mower fuel does not.

Ready.gov and CDC both say to replace water you bottled yourself every six months. Pick two easy-to-remember dates and swap the water then. Use the old water for plants or cleaning, then sanitize and refill.

Tip: When you pour water from a big container, use a clean scoop or pour it out. CDC says never to dip your

hands into stored water.

Making water safe to drink

If you are not sure your water is safe, treat it before you drink it, cook with it, brush your teeth with it, wash food with it, make ice with it or mix baby formula with it. CDC says to use bottled, boiled or treated water for all of those.

Step one: clear up cloudy water

CDC says to filter cloudy water through a clean cloth, paper towel or coffee filter, or let it settle and then draw off the clear water on top. Do this before you boil or disinfect it.

Boiling: the best way to kill germs

CDC calls boiling the best way to kill germs.

1. Bring clear water to a rolling boil for 1 minute. A rolling boil is a hard boil with big bubbles that keeps going even when you stir it.
2. If you live above 6,500 feet in elevation, boil for 3 minutes instead.
3. Let the water cool.
4. Store it in clean, sanitized containers with tight covers.

Boiled water can taste flat. CDC suggests pouring it back and forth between two clean containers and letting it stand for a few hours, or adding a pinch of salt for each quart or liter.

Disinfecting with household bleach

If you can't boil water, you can use regular unscented household chlorine bleach. Check the label first. CDC says to use bleach that contains 5% to 9% sodium hypochlorite, and if the label has its own directions for treating drinking water, follow those.

Amount of clear water	Bleach (5% to 9% sodium hypochlorite)
1 quart or 1 liter	2 drops
1 gallon	8 drops (about 1/2 mL, a little less than 1/8 teaspoon)
5 gallons	40 drops (about 2 1/2 mL, or 1/2 teaspoon)

1. Use clean, settled or filtered water if you can.
2. Add the amount of bleach shown in the table. Use a clean medicine dropper if you have one.
3. If the water is cloudy, murky, colored or very cold, double the amount of bleach.
4. Stir well.
5. Let it stand for at least 30 minutes before you drink it.

Caution: Use only plain, unscented household bleach. Check the date on your bottle too. FoodSafety.gov suggests replacing a stored bottle of bleach each year.

Tip: Keep a small dropper bottle and a sealed, dated bottle of unscented bleach with your water supply. Replace the bleach yearly.

Water treatment tablets and drops

Water treatment tablets and drops are small products you add to water to kill germs. They are often made with chlorine dioxide, chlorine or iodine. CDC says to follow the directions on the product label, since each one is made for a certain amount of water.

CDC also notes some limits:

- Iodine and chlorine tablets do not kill Cryptosporidium, a common germ that causes diarrhea. Chlorine dioxide does, if used correctly.
- People who are pregnant, have thyroid problems or are sensitive to iodine should avoid iodine-treated water, and no one should drink iodine-treated water for more than a few weeks.

Portable water filters

A portable water filter is a hand-held or pump device that strains germs out of water. CDC says portable filters do not remove viruses. To remove bacteria, a filter's pore size must be 0.3 micron or smaller (a micron is one-millionth of a meter). For parasites like Giardia and Cryptosporidium, it must be 1 micron or smaller. CDC says to add a chemical disinfectant, such as chlorine, chlorine dioxide or iodine, after filtering, since chemical disinfectants kill viruses and bacteria.

Method	Kills germs?	Notes
Boiling	Yes, best method	1 minute; 3 minutes above 6,500 feet
Unscented bleach	Viruses and bacteria; may not kill parasites	8 drops per gallon; wait 30 minutes
Chlorine dioxide tablets	Viruses and bacteria; also Cryptosporidium if used as directed	Follow the label
Iodine or chlorine tablets	Viruses and bacteria	Do not kill Cryptosporidium
Portable filter	Bacteria and parasites, by pore size	Does not remove viruses
Any of the above	No	Cannot fix water with fuel, toxic chemicals or radioactive material

A Starter Kit

Ready.gov basic kit

Item	Why you need it	Notes
Water	Drinking and sanitation	About one gallon per person per day for several days (Chapter 3)
Food	Several days of meals	Non-perishable food (Chapter 4)
Battery-powered or hand-crank radio	News when power and internet are out	Ready.gov also lists a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert (Chapter 6)
Flashlight	Light in an outage	Use instead of candles (Chapter 9)
First aid kit	Treat small injuries	See Chapter 8
Extra batteries	For radio and flashlights	Match the sizes you need
Whistle	Signal for help	Carries farther than your voice
Dust mask	Filter contaminated air	For dust and debris
Plastic sheeting, scissors, duct tape	Shelter in place	See Chapter 7
Moist towelettes, garbage bags, plastic ties	Personal sanitation	See Chapter 3
Wrench or pliers	Turn off utilities	See Chapter 9
Manual can opener	Open canned food	Don't rely on an electric one
Local maps	Find routes if phones fail	Paper maps
Cell phone with chargers and a backup battery	Stay in touch	Keep a battery pack charged

NOAA stands for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the federal agency that runs the National Weather Service. A NOAA Weather Radio is a special radio that picks up weather alerts broadcast by the National Weather Service. A "tone alert" model sounds an alarm when a warning is issued, even if the radio is otherwise quiet. Chapter 6 explains these radios in more detail.

The go-bag

What goes in a go-bag

Item	Suggestion
Water	A few bottles per person; you can find more water at a shelter or along the way
Food	Light, no-cook snacks and bars
Medications	A supply of prescription medicines, with a list of names and doses
Flashlight and batteries	One per bag
Phone charger and backup battery	Charged ahead of time
First aid basics	Bandages, pain reliever, any personal items
Copies of documents	In a waterproof bag
Cash	Small bills
Clothing	A change of clothes, sturdy shoes, a rain jacket
Personal hygiene items	Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, feminine supplies
Glasses and contact lens supplies	Even if you usually wear contacts

Item	Suggestion
Whistle and dust mask	Light and small
Comfort items	A small game, book or stuffed animal for kids
Contact list	Written on paper (see Chapter 2)

Tip: Keep your go-bag near the door you use most, or in a hall closet. If you have to leave in a few minutes, you won't have time to dig through the garage.

Know the Alert Words

These words get mixed up all the time, and the difference matters. The National Weather Service uses them in a set way:

Term	What the NWS means	What you do
Outlook	A significant weather event is possible, up to about 7 days ahead	Keep an eye on the forecast. Check your supplies.
Watch	Conditions are favorable for the hazard in and near the watch area. Issued up to about 72 hours ahead.	Get ready. Review your plan, charge your phone, know where you'll go.
Advisory	The weather will cause nuisance conditions, less serious than a warning	Take care. Adjust travel and outdoor plans.
Warning	A significant weather event will pose a risk to life and property	Act now. Follow your plan and official instructions.

An easy way to remember it: a watch means "watch out, this could happen." A warning means "this is a real threat to life and property, so take action."

You might ask, "If I'm only under a watch, do I need to do anything?" Yes, a little. A watch is your window to get ready while it's still calm: gas up the car, charge everything, bring in the patio furniture, and decide where you'd shelter. When the warning comes, there's no time left for errands.

The scenario chapters (11 to 25) explain the alerts for each hazard, such as hurricane, tornado, flood, winter and heat alerts. Some of those names have changed in recent years, and each chapter uses the current names.

Rules That Save Lives

These are the numbers and rules worth knowing by heart. Each one comes from an official source, checked in October 2026, and each is explained in the chapter of USA Survival Guide shown in the last column.

Phone numbers

Who	Number	When to use it
Emergency	911	Anyone hurt, trapped or in danger
Poison Help	1-800-222-1222	Someone swallowed, breathed in or touched something harmful
988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988	A mental health or suicide crisis
Disaster Distress Helpline	Call or text 1-800-985-5990	Emotional distress after a disaster
FEMA Helpline	1-800-621-3362	Questions about a FEMA disaster assistance application
Local help	Dial 211	Finding local help with food, housing, utilities and recovery

Rules of thumb

Topic	The rule	Book chapter
Water to store	One gallon per person per day for several days; build toward two weeks if you can	3
Boiling water	Rolling boil for 1 minute; 3 minutes above 6,500 feet	3
Bleach for water	8 drops of unscented household bleach (5% to 9%) per gallon; double for cloudy or very cold water; wait at least 30 minutes	3
Fridge in an outage	About 4 hours if the door stays closed	4
Freezer in an outage	About 48 hours if full, 24 hours if half full, door closed	4
Generators	Outside only, at least 20 feet from doors, windows and vents	10
Downed power lines	Assume they're live; stay at least 35 feet away and call 911	10
Floodwater	6 inches of fast-moving water can knock over an adult; 12 inches can carry away a small car. Turn Around Don't Drown	13
Lightning	When thunder roars, go indoors; wait 30 minutes after the last thunder	12
Earthquake	Drop, Cover, and Hold On	15
Tsunami signs near the coast	A strong or long earthquake, the ocean suddenly rising or falling, or a loud roar from the sea: go to high ground or inland right away	16

Topic	The rule	Book chapter
Gas leak	Smell gas? Get everyone out, then call the gas company or 911 from outside. Never turn the gas back on yourself	9
Radiation emergency	Get Inside, Stay Inside, Stay Tuned	21
Active attacker	Run, Hide, Fight	22

Watch or warning?

Term	What it means	What you do
Watch	Conditions are favorable for the hazard	Get ready
Advisory	Less serious conditions that can still cause trouble	Take care
Warning	A real threat to life and property	Act now

Your Family Contact Plan

These three pages come from the full book and from the USA Survival Guide Family Emergency Planner. Fill them out in pencil, then make a wallet card for everyone in the house.

Form 1: Family Emergency Plan

See Chapter 2 of USA Survival Guide.

Household member	Date of birth	Cell phone	Work or school

Meeting place	Address or description
Right outside our home (for a fire)	
Near our neighborhood (if we can't get home)	
Outside our town (if we have to leave the area)	

Out-of-area contact (everyone checks in with this person)	Phone	Email
Backup contact		

Who picks up the kids?	First choice	Backup
Name and phone		
School or daycare release form updated? (date)		

Our family's word or phrase to confirm a message is really from us:

Form 2: Emergency Contacts

Call 911 for any life-threatening emergency. Poison Control is 1-800-222-1222.

Contact	Name	Phone
Doctor		
Second doctor or specialist		
Pharmacy		
Veterinarian		
Electric company (outages)		
Gas company (leaks)		
Water company		
Insurance agent		
Landlord or property manager		
Neighbor		
Neighbor		
Workplace		
Workplace		
School or daycare		
School or daycare		
County emergency management office		
Other		

Form 3: Wallet Contact Cards

Cut these out, fold them, and put one in every wallet, purse, backpack and go-bag. Kids too young to carry a phone need one most.

Name:	**Name:**
Out-of-area contact:	Out-of-area contact:
Phone:	Phone:
Meeting place:	Meeting place:
Medical needs:	Medical needs:

Name:	**Name:**
Out-of-area contact:	Out-of-area contact:
Phone:	Phone:
Meeting place:	Meeting place:
Medical needs:	Medical needs:

Name:	**Name:**
Out-of-area contact:	Out-of-area contact:
Phone:	Phone:
Meeting place:	Meeting place:
Medical needs:	Medical needs:

Get the Whole Plan

This guide covers the first steps. The full book, USA Survival Guide: A Plain-Speak Plan for Every Kind of Emergency in the United States, takes you the rest of the way, with a chapter for each kind of emergency that happens in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Each chapter covers what to do before, during, and after, with notes for kids, older adults, people with disabilities, pets, and renters, and ends with a short checklist.

Every fact in the book is traced to an official source, listed chapter by chapter at the back.

What is inside the full book

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Know Your Risks: Hazards Where You Live
- Chapter 2: Your Family Emergency Plan
- Chapter 3: Water
- Chapter 4: Food
- Chapter 5: Emergency Kits: Home, Go-Bag, Car, and Work
- Chapter 6: Alerts and Staying in Touch
- Chapter 7: Shelter in Place or Evacuate
- Chapter 8: First Aid and Staying Healthy
- Chapter 9: Home Safety: Utilities, Fire, and Carbon Monoxide
- Chapter 10: Power Outages
- Chapter 11: Hurricanes
- Chapter 12: Tornadoes and Severe Thunderstorms
- Chapter 13: Floods
- Chapter 14: Wildfires and Smoke
- Chapter 15: Earthquakes
- Chapter 16: Tsunamis, Volcanoes, and Landslides
- Chapter 17: Winter Storms and Extreme Cold
- Chapter 18: Extreme Heat and Drought
- Chapter 19: Pandemics and Disease Outbreaks
- Chapter 20: Chemical and Hazardous Materials Accidents
- Chapter 21: Nuclear and Radiation Emergencies
- Chapter 22: Civil Unrest and Active Threats
- Chapter 23: Cyberattacks and Long Disruptions
- Chapter 24: Money Trouble and Job Loss
- Chapter 25: Stranded: In Your Car or Outdoors
- Chapter 26: After the Disaster: Recovery
- Chapter 27: Checklists and Forms

The full book and planner are free too

Like this guide, the full USA Survival Guide and the USA Survival Guide Family Emergency Planner are free, in Word and PDF. The planner holds all of the book's fill-in forms in one place, with extra medical pages for each person in the house and room for pets, kit checks and a yearly review. Print them, copy them, and share them with family and friends.

Sources

These are the official pages behind the facts in these pages, checked in October 2026. The full list, chapter by chapter, is in USA Survival Guide.

Ready.gov Build a Kit: survive on your own for several days; one gallon per person per day for several days; re-think needs every year. https://www.ready.gov/kit

Cal OES News (April 18, 2023): every county in California offers free emergency alerts; sign up in the county you live, work, or both.. https://www.news.caloes.ca.gov/stay-informed-stay-prepared-sign-up-for-emergency-alerts/

Ready.gov Water: store in cool, dark place; replace home-filled water every six months. https://www.ready.gov/water

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FoodSafety.gov: refrigerator and freezer times. https://www.foodsafety.gov/blog/three-ways-keep-food-safe-when-you-lose-power

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American Red Cross, Power Outage Safety: downed lines. https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/power-outage.html

National Weather Service: floodwater depths, Turn Around Don't Drown. https://www.weather.gov/ohx/flooding

HRSA, Calling Poison Help. https://poisonhelp.hrsa.gov/faq/calling-poison-help

SAMHSA, Disaster Distress Helpline. https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/helplines/disaster-distress-helpline

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. https://988lifeline.org/

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211. https://211.org/

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Earthquake Country Alliance: gas safety. https://www.earthquakecountry.org/step1/gassafety/

CDC: Get Inside, Stay Inside, Stay Tuned. https://www.cdc.gov/radiation-emergencies/features/be-ready.html

Ready.gov, Attacks in Crowded and Public Spaces: Run, Hide, Fight. https://www.ready.gov/terrorism

About the Author

Andrew Dominguez is a business professional and the owner of Trinfinity Enterprises. He has spent about 40 years in utility and infrastructure work. He writes the way he teaches: plainly, and for the person doing the work.

He is also the author of USA Survival Guide; Project and Program Management, Phase by Phase; Revelation Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study; and New Beginnings: A Course in Reconciliation & Recovery. He and his wife, Tracy, live in Dayton, Nevada.