THE WEATHER ZOMBIE

Survival Guide

Eight hazards, what to do about each, and the misconception that gets people killed in every one of them.

Most preparedness advice is a list of things to buy. This is a list of things to know, organised by what is happening to you rather than by what is in the cupboard.

Every figure in this guide comes from the National Weather Service, FEMA, the Centers for Disease Control or the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Each section ends with the belief that most reliably kills people in that particular emergency.

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weatherzombie.io/guide

The web version updates with live conditions: local hurricane watches and warnings, current earthquakes, space weather and the viewing forecast.

Informational only, and no substitute for what your local emergency services tell you on the day. When officials say go, go.
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The one that applies everywhere: carbon monoxide

It appears in four of the eight sections because it is what people reach for when the power goes: a generator, a camping stove, a gas oven, a barbecue. It is colourless, odourless, builds faster than an open window clears it, and lingers for hours after the engine stops. Nearly a hundred people a year die in the United States from portable generators alone. Generators go outdoors only, at least twenty feet from the building, with the exhaust pointed away from windows, doors and vents. Not in a garage, not in a carport, not on a porch.

PART 1

Hurricanes and Tropical Storms

The wind gets the headlines and the category number. The water does the killing.

> **WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE**
> Storm surge and inland flooding cause the large majority of tropical cyclone deaths in the United States. The Saffir-Simpson category measures wind and nothing else, which is why a Category 1 can be deadlier than a Category 4 that comes ashore somewhere flat and empty.

Before

- Find out now whether your address is in a storm surge evacuation zone. It is not the same as a flood zone, and the difference is measured in feet of water.
- Do the outdoor work during the watch, not the warning. A watch means 48 hours; a warning means 36, and by then the wind is often too strong to be up a ladder.
- Fit shutters or 5/8-inch marine plywood cut to size in advance. Tape on glass does nothing except make the shards larger.
- Trim branches back from the house and clear the gutters. Most wind damage starts with something that was already loose.
- Fill the car before the queues start, and fill the bath and every container once the warning is issued.
- Photograph every room and the outside of the house. Insurance arguments are won with timestamps.

During

- Stay on the lowest floor that will not flood, in an interior room, away from every window.
- If the wind drops and the sky clears, that is the eye and not the end. The far eyewall arrives next, with the wind reversed.
- Do not go out to look at the damage between bands.
- Keep the phone charged and off unless you need it. Text rather than call when the network is loaded.

After

- Assume every downed line is live, and every pool of water hiding one.
- Wait for officials to say the roads are open before driving. Washed-out bridges do not look washed out from a car.
- Photograph damage before touching anything.
- Never run a generator indoors, in a garage, in a carport or on a porch. Twenty feet from the house, exhaust pointed away.

THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG

“The eye means it is over.”

The calm centre can last forty minutes and feels completely convincing. People go outside to check on the car and are caught by the far eyewall, where the wind arrives at full strength from the opposite direction, carrying everything the first half loosened.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/hurricane/ - See whether a watch or warning is in force where you are

PART 2

Floods and Flash Floods

The most dangerous thing about a flood is how ordinary a foot of water looks from a driver's seat.

WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE

The CDC finds that over half of all flood-related drownings happen when a vehicle is driven into flood water. The National Weather Service is blunt about the numbers: six inches of fast-moving water can knock an adult over, twelve inches will carry away most cars, and two feet will carry away SUVs and trucks.

Before

- Learn your elevation and whether the land around you drains anywhere. Flash floods happen in places that are not on a flood map.
- Keep the important documents somewhere you can grab in one movement, in a waterproof bag.
- Know two routes out that do not cross a low bridge or an underpass.
- Standard home insurance does not usually cover flood damage. Find out what yours actually says before you need to know.

During

- Turn around. Do not drive through it, however shallow it looks, and however well you know the road.
- The road under the water may not be there any more — moving water scours out the surface from beneath.
- If water rises around a stopped car, get out and go to higher ground while the doors still open.
- Move up, not out, if you are on foot and cut off. Roof, not attic, unless the attic has a way out.
- Stay out of moving water on foot, and out of standing water that may be carrying a live line.

After

- Flood water carries sewage, fuel and whatever was in the shed upstream. Treat everything it touched as contaminated.
- Do not drink from the tap until the utility says it is safe.
- Throw away food that touched flood water, including anything in sealed packaging that is not a metal can.
- Photograph everything before you start pulling out carpet.

THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG

"My car is heavy enough."

Buoyancy does not care what your car weighs. Around twelve inches of water displaces enough to float most vehicles, and once it floats it steers nowhere. Two feet moves a loaded pickup. The water on the road is also usually deeper in the middle, where you cannot see the dip.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/radar/ - Watch the rain coming on the live radar

PART 3

Wildfire

Houses in a wildfire mostly do not catch from a wall of flame. They catch from embers, hours ahead of it.

> **WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE**
> Wind-driven embers travel a mile or more in front of a fire and land in gutters, on decks, under eaves and in vents. Most homes lost in a wildfire are ignited by those, not by the fire front arriving. It is also why leaving early matters more than any single preparation: the roads close before the fire gets there.

Before

- Clear five feet of anything burnable away from the walls — bark mulch, woodpiles, the plastic bin, the doormat.
- Get the leaves out of the gutters and off the roof, and screen the vents with fine metal mesh.
- Keep a go-bag by the door in season, and back the car in so you can leave without a three-point turn.
- Agree a meeting point and an out-of-area contact. Local lines fail first.
- Photograph the house and its contents while it is standing.

During

- Leave when you are told, or before. People die in cars on blocked roads, not in houses they left too early.
- Close every window and door, and interior doors too, but leave them unlocked for firefighters.
- Move furniture to the middle of rooms, away from windows.
- Turn on outside lights so the house is visible through smoke.
- If you are caught in the open, look for a road cut, a ditch, anything already burnt — and stay low.

After

- Do not go back until officials open the area. Stumps and roots burn underground for days.
- Wear an N95 or better. Ash carries what the buildings were made of, which in older houses can include asbestos.
- Check the roof and the attic for embers before you go to bed on the first night home.
- Watch the slopes above you when the rain comes. Burnt ground sheds water instead of absorbing it, and debris flows follow fires.

THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG

“I will hose the roof down and defend the house.”

Mains pressure usually fails during a wildfire, smoke makes it impossible to see or breathe, and radiant heat can ignite clothing well before flames arrive. Fire services are consistent on this: decide early whether you are leaving, and if you are, leave early.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/hazards/ - Active fire and hazard alerts worldwide

PART 4

Extreme Heat

Over the last decade heat has killed more Americans each year than hurricanes, tornadoes and floods combined, and it does it quietly.

WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE

There is no wreckage and no footage, so heat waves do not look like disasters. The people who die are disproportionately old, alone, and indoors without air conditioning. Checking on someone is a more effective intervention than anything you can buy.

Before

- Find out now which neighbours live alone, and agree that you will knock during a heat wave.
- Know where the nearest cooling centre, library or air-conditioned shop is.
- Check that fans are not your only plan — above about 95°F a fan moves hot air over you and stops helping.
- Ask a pharmacist whether any of your medications affect how you handle heat. Several common ones do.

During

- Drink before you are thirsty. Thirst lags behind dehydration.
- Move activity to early morning. The heat index peaks hours after noon, not at it.
- Never leave a person or an animal in a parked car, in any weather that is even warm. The interior outruns the outside temperature quickly and does not stop.
- Wear light colours, loose weave, and a hat with a brim.
- Cool the person, not just the room: wet cloths, a cool bath, air moving over damp skin.

After

- Keep checking on people for a day or two afterwards. Heat illness can present late.
- Rehydrate slowly and steadily rather than all at once.
- Look at what failed — the fan that was not enough, the room that never cooled — before the next one.

THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG

“Heat exhaustion and heat stroke are the same thing with different names.”

They are different emergencies. Heat exhaustion is heavy sweating, cool clammy skin, a weak fast pulse, dizziness and nausea — move them somewhere cool, loosen clothing, cool wet cloths, small sips of water. Heat stroke is a body temperature above 103°F, hot skin that may be dry, confusion, slurred speech, a strong rapid pulse. That is a medical emergency: call 911 immediately, cool them any way you can, and do not give fluids. The NWS is explicit that delay can be fatal.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/ - Today’s heat index for your location

PART 5

Winter Storms and Extreme Cold

Winter storms kill mostly indirectly: on the roads, on the shovel, and from what people burn to keep warm.

WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE

The direct danger is hypothermia, but the larger toll comes from traffic collisions, heart attacks during snow clearing, and carbon monoxide from heaters, stoves and generators brought inside. Nearly a hundred Americans a year die of CO poisoning from portable generators alone.

Before

- Insulate pipes on outside walls, and know where the stopcock is.
- Keep the car above half a tank through the winter, with a blanket, water and a shovel in the boot.
- Have a way to stay warm that does not need the grid, and make sure it is one you can run safely indoors.
- Fit a carbon monoxide alarm with a battery. Every floor.

During

- Stay off the roads. Most winter storm deaths happen in vehicles.
- Dress in layers and keep dry — wet clothing strips heat many times faster than cold air alone.
- Let taps drip on outside walls to keep pipes from bursting.
- Never heat a house with a gas oven, a barbecue or a generator. Not with the windows open, not for a few minutes.
- Shovel in stages and stop if your chest tightens. Cold plus exertion is a well-documented cardiac trigger.

After

- Check the roof load if snow is deep and wet, especially on flat sections.
- Look in on neighbours who may have lost heat.
- Watch for frostbite on the extremities: white or greyish skin, numbness, a waxy feel. Warm gradually, never with direct heat.
- Clear vents and flues of snow before relighting anything.

THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG

“Cracking a window makes an indoor generator or heater safe.”

It does not. The CPSC is unambiguous: opening doors and windows does not provide enough ventilation to prevent lethal carbon monoxide building up. Generators belong outdoors only, at least twenty feet from the house, with the exhaust pointed away from windows, doors and vents — not in a garage, not in a carport, not on a porch.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/ - Wind chill and the current forecast

PART 6

Tornadoes

You get minutes, not hours. Everything that matters has to be decided in advance.

WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE

Most tornado deaths are from flying debris and from structures failing around people. Mobile and manufactured homes are dangerously overrepresented: they offer almost no protection at any tornado strength, however well they are anchored.

Before

- Decide your safe place now — lowest floor, innermost room, no windows. A basement, or a bathroom or cupboard under the stairs.
- If you live in a mobile home, find out tonight where the nearest permanent shelter is and how long it takes to reach.
- Get alerts that will wake you. A large share of tornado deaths happen at night.
- Keep shoes and a torch in the safe place. You may be walking out over broken glass and timber.

During

- Go immediately on a warning — do not wait to see it, and do not go outside to look.
- Put as many walls between you and the outside as you can, and get under something sturdy.
- Cover your head and neck. A bicycle or motorcycle helmet is a genuinely good idea.
- Leave a mobile home for a permanent building or a ditch. A mobile home is not a shelter.
- If you are caught in a car with no building nearby, a low ditch away from the vehicle beats staying in it.

After

- Stay out of damaged buildings.
- Assume every line is live and every gas smell is real.
- Text rather than call so the networks stay open for emergency traffic.
- Watch for nails, glass and unstable walls. Most injuries after a tornado happen during the clean-up.

THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG

“Shelter under a motorway overpass.”

An overpass is one of the worst places you can be. The gap under the deck accelerates the wind through it, the structure offers no protection from debris travelling at that speed, and stopping there blocks the road for everyone behind you. A low ditch, lying flat, is genuinely safer.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/radar/ - Live storm structure and radar

PART 7

Earthquakes

No warning at all, and the most dangerous instinct — running outside — is the one everyone has.

> **WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE**
> In countries with modern building codes, most injuries come from falling objects and from people moving during the shaking, not from buildings collapsing. Doorways and exteriors are where people get hurt; the floor under a solid table is where they do not.

Before

- Strap the water heater and the tall furniture to the studs. Latch the cupboards that are above head height.
- Keep shoes and a torch under the bed. Broken glass is the first hazard after the shaking stops.
- Know where the gas shut-off is and what tool it needs, and keep that tool with it.
- Store water. Mains supply is often the last utility restored.
- Standard home insurance does not cover earthquake damage. It is a separate policy.

During

- Drop, cover and hold on. Under a sturdy table if there is one; against an interior wall away from windows if not.
- Stay where you are. Do not run outside — falling glass and masonry come down at the edges of buildings.
- In bed, stay there and cover your head with a pillow.
- In a car, pull over clear of bridges, overpasses and wires, and stay in it.
- Expect it to feel much longer than it is.

After

- Expect aftershocks, and expect one of them to be large. Get clear of anything the mainshock weakened.
- Check for gas by smell and sound, not with a flame. If you smell it, get out and shut it off from outside.
- If you are near the coast and the shaking was long or strong, move inland and uphill without waiting for a tsunami warning. The shaking is the warning.
- Text rather than call, and keep off the roads.

> **THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG**
> **“Stand in a doorway.”**
> That advice comes from photographs of adobe houses where the doorframe was the only part left standing. In a modern building the doorway is no stronger than the wall, it puts you next to a door that can swing and crush fingers, and it leaves your head unprotected from everything coming off the shelves. Drop, cover, hold on.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/hazards/ - Recent earthquakes worldwide, with the significant ones kept for a month

PART 8

Power Cuts and Grid-Down

A long outage is not one problem. It is heat or cold, water, food, medication and information failing together.

> **WHAT ACTUALLY KILLS PEOPLE**
> Almost nobody is killed by the absence of electricity. They are killed by what gets used to replace it — generators and stoves brought indoors — and by the loss of heating, cooling and powered medical equipment.

Before

- Write down what in your household actually needs power: oxygen concentrator, CPAP, refrigerated insulin, a stairlift. Plan for each one specifically.
- Keep a battery or crank radio. When the mobile network goes, broadcast radio is usually still there.
- Store water: mains pressure often depends on electric pumps.
- Keep some cash. Card terminals and ATMs go down with the grid.
- Fit carbon monoxide alarms, and put a thermometer in the fridge and the freezer.

During

- Generators outdoors only, twenty feet from the building, exhaust pointed away from windows, doors and vents.
- Keep the fridge and freezer shut. Roughly four hours in a closed fridge, about forty-eight in a full freezer and half that in a half-empty one.
- Never use a barbecue, camping stove or gas oven for indoor heat.
- Unplug electronics so the surge on restoration does not take them out.
- Gather the household into one room and heat or cool that, rather than the whole house.

After

- When in doubt, throw it out. Food that has been above 40°F for more than two hours is not worth the risk, and it will not smell wrong.
- Restart appliances a few at a time.
- Restock whatever you used before the next one.
- Note what actually ran out. It is rarely what people expect — usually it is cash, batteries and patience.

THE THING PEOPLE GET WRONG

“The generator is fine in the garage with the door open.”

This is the single most lethal misconception in this entire guide. Carbon monoxide is colourless and odourless, it builds up faster than an open door clears it, and it can linger for hours after the engine stops. It kills nearly a hundred people a year in the United States from portable generators alone. Outdoors, twenty feet, exhaust pointed away. There is no safe indoor version of this.

Live on the site: weatherzombie.io/fuel/ - Fuel prices and availability

Where this comes from

Every factual claim in this guide is drawn from United States government sources, which publish this material precisely so that it can be passed on:

- National Weather Service (weather.gov) - flood water depths, heat illness thresholds, tropical watch and warning lead times
- FEMA (ready.gov) - preparedness and evacuation guidance
- Centers for Disease Control (cdc.gov) - flood drowning statistics, carbon monoxide
- Consumer Product Safety Commission (cpsc.gov) - generator placement and carbon monoxide deaths
- National Hurricane Center (nhc.noaa.gov) - the Saffir-Simpson scale and the forecast cone

What this guide is not

It is not a substitute for instructions from your local emergency management agency, and it is not insurance or legal advice. Conditions vary; the people running an evacuation in your county know things this document cannot. When an official tells you to leave, leave, whatever any page says.

The live version

A PDF cannot tell you that a hurricane warning is in force for your address. The website can, and it reads the same National Weather Service feeds this guide describes.

- weatherzombie.io/guide - this guide, kept current
- weatherzombie.io/hurricane - tropical terms, bound to live watches and warnings
- weatherzombie.io/hazards - worldwide earthquakes, volcanoes and disaster alerts
- weatherzombie.io/survival-kit - the kit list this guide deliberately is not