

Preparing for Winter Storms

Why Think about Winter Weather?

In many parts of Texas, severe winter weather can threaten your safety and the safety of your property. Blizzards, heavy snow, freezing rain, ice, and freezing temperatures occasionally cause havoc in parts of Texas. Winter storms are known as deceptive killers because most deaths are indirectly related to the storm. Some causes of injury and death include hypothermia from prolonged exposure to the cold, carbon monoxide poisoning from defective heating units and/or poor ventilation, and automobile accidents. According to the National Weather Service, about half of people who die from hypothermia are over the age of 60. The majority of fatalities that occur due to ice and snow happen in automobile accidents; other fatalities occur because people are caught out in the storm. Even if you think you are safe and warm at home, a winter storm can become dangerous if the power goes off. With a little planning, you can protect yourself and your family and keep your property losses to a minimum.

What Should I Do to Protect Myself?

1. Make a family disaster plan. Prepare for winter weather hazards that may affect the area in which you live by making a family disaster plan. When making a plan, you will need to consider whether you will evacuate or shelter in place. When winter storms are approaching, we typically have some warning, which gives us time to better prepare. If the storm brings unexpected severe weather, families need to know how they will communicate. Determine what you will do if you shelter in place and lose power. How will you care for your animals? What do you need to do to prepare if someone in the household has special needs, and how will you accommodate them? You need to know how to shut off the water at your meter. Your family disaster plan will help you to respond appropriately and make wise decisions about winter weather emergencies.

2. Get prepared. The main concerns related to winter weather are loss of heat, power, and telephone service, as well as a shortage of supplies if storm conditions are severe or continue for more than a day. **Take an inventory** of emergency items on hand to make sure you have everything needed to survive for three to five days. Make two lists—one of what you already have and one of what you will need. Don't forget to check camping gear that may be stored away; items such as propane camping stoves, lanterns, matches, and sleeping bags can be very useful. The disaster supplies listed below serve as a general guideline. Each family is unique and has different needs, so adjust the contents of your kit accordingly.

- **Flashlights.** Be sure to have extra batteries.

- **Telephone.** If your electricity is lost, cordless phones will not work. However, as long as the phone lines are functioning properly, an old-fashioned style phone with a cord connecting the handset to the phone base will work. Cell phones may or may not work. Battery powered two-way radios are one way to stay in communication with family members who are inside the radio's range limit.
- **Extra set of car and house keys.** Store an extra set of keys in a place outside your home that you know you can access in case of an emergency. If electric power is lost, garage door openers will not work, and an extra set of keys may come in handy.
- **Battery-powered NOAA weather radio and an A.M./F.M. battery-powered radio.** These radios may be your only links to outside information. Be sure to have extra batteries.
- **Water.** Keep a three-day supply of **bottled water**. Have available one gallon of water per person per day for drinking. During extended storms, water from the water heater tank can be used for drinking. If you have advanced warning of a storm, the bath tub can be filled with water to be used for flushing toilets.
- **Food.** Keep high-energy foods on hand such as dried fruit, nuts, cereal, granola bars, and other food that requires no cooking or refrigeration.
- **Cash.** Keep extra cash in an easily accessible place in case of an emergency. ATM machines may not work if electricity is lost.
- **First aid kit, baby supplies and prescription medication.**
- **Heating fuel.** Check your fuel level frequently during the winter months, and make sure to refuel your tank before it is empty. Fuel carriers may not reach you for days after a winter storm.
- **Emergency heat sources.** Fireplaces, wood stoves, and kerosene heaters are good "alternate" sources of heat in an emergency situation. **Never burn charcoal indoors! It releases carbon monoxide.** If you choose one of these appliances to heat your home, know how to use it safely and appropriately. If you use a gas-powered portable generator, it must be set up in a dry outdoor area and away from air intakes to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. Know what wattage the generator will support, and carefully follow the manufacturer's directions for use. The generator will be helpful when there is electrical power loss. Depending on the generator, it may be used to run some appliances, but it may not have enough wattage for running an electric space heater. Check the wattage requirements.
 - Mid-Sized generators (4,000–5,000 watts) will power your basic survival appliances, including your refrigerator, sump pump, furnace fan, and several other appliances.
 - Large generators (6,000–9,000 watts) will help make the power outage experience more peaceful, supplying power to even more appliances.
 - X-Large generators (10,000+ watts) supply enough electricity to restore power to small homes. Most include an electric starter, which is ideal for elderly homeowners who are unable to pull the cord.



- **Fire extinguishers, smoke alarms, and carbon monoxide alarms.** Test smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms once a month to ensure they work properly. The U.S. Fire Administration recommends that you replace the batteries every six months. Know how to safely and properly use a fire extinguisher, and maintain it by checking the pressure level gauge at least once a year.

3. Be prepared while traveling in a vehicle. Take extra precautions to avoid extreme winter weather while on the road. Plan trips and check the latest weather reports before traveling to your destination. Fully check and winterize your vehicle before the winter season begins. This preparation includes checking the battery, ignition system, thermostat, lights, flashers, exhaust, heater, brakes, defroster, tires, antifreeze, windshield washer fluid, and oil. Keep your gas tank near full to avoid ice in the tank and fuel lines. Avoid traveling alone, and let a friend or family member know your travel route/itinerary.

Carry a winter storm survival kit in your car, which should include:

- mobile phone, charger, and battery;
- blankets/sleeping bags;
- flashlight with extra batteries;
- first-aid kit;
- knife;
- drinking water;
- high calorie, non-perishable food;
- extra clothing to keep dry;
- large empty can to use as emergency toilet;
- tissues and paper towels;
- small can and waterproof matches;
- sack of sand or cat litter for traction;
- shovel;
- windshield scraper and brush;
- tool kit;
- tow rope;
- battery booster cables;
- water container;
- compass and road maps; and
- emergency flares and fluorescent flag.

4. Dress for the season. Wear several layers of loose fitting, lightweight, warm clothing instead of one layer of heavy clothing. Dressing in layers allows for an easy adjustment if you become too hot or cold. Make sure that outer garments are water-repellent. Wear a hat, as half of your body heat can be lost from the head. Cover your mouth with a scarf to protect your lungs from extremely cold air.

5. Prepare animals/pets. Farm animals and pets require extra attention when it's cold outside. Take extra precautions to ensure the well-being of your animals by providing plenty of water and food, as well as appropriate shelter. For more information on winter care for animals visit, http://www.americanhumane.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pa_care_issues_wintercare.

References:

U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Weather Service. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/brochures/winterstorm.pdf>

Purdue Extension, Ten Things to Prepare for Winter Storms. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from <http://www.ces.purdue.edu/eden/disasters/winter/Winter%20Press%20Release1.pdf>

FEMA, Winter Weather Preparedness Tips. Retrieved November 1, 2005, from <http://www.fema.gov/hazards/winterstorms/winterweatherf.shtm>

This information was written by Janie Harris and Lisa Norman with Texas AgriLife Extension, The Texas A&M University System, November 2005, <http://fcs.tamu.edu/>.