

DURING THE EMERGENCY

What to Do Right Now

Everything else on this site is about building up what you own and know before something happens. This page is different: it's the specific reflexes and decisions for the moment something's actually happening, or about to, but they only work if you've already practiced them. Read it now, calmly, until it's reflex, not later, once there's no time left to learn it. If you're in the middle of something right now, start with the box that matches your situation below.

JUMP TO:

Earthquake

Tornado

Structure fire

Flash flood

Utility danger

Air/chemical danger

Wind or debris

A direct threat

Nearby unrest

First: a few reflexes, not decisions

For these four, there's no time to think through a decision tree. Do the action first; figure out the rest once the immediate danger has passed.

EARTHQUAKE**Drop, Cover, Hold On**

Drop to your hands and knees right where you are. Cover your head and neck with one arm; get under a sturdy table if one's within reach. Hold on until the shaking stops. Do not run outside during the shaking. (Some quakes have a foreshock beforehand, but it's only identifiable as one in hindsight, so there's nothing to act on ahead of time.)

TORNADO**Get to the lowest interior room, no windows**

A basement is best. Otherwise a closet, bathroom, or interior hallway on the lowest floor. Put as many walls as possible between you and the outside, and cover your head and neck. In a mobile home, get out and to a sturdy building instead, mobile homes are never safe shelter even secured. In a vehicle with no sturdy shelter reachable, get out and into a low ditch or ravine, never under an overpass.

STRUCTURE FIRE

Get out. Don't stop for anything.

Get low under smoke. Check doors for heat with the back of your hand before opening them. Once you're out, stay out, and call 911 from outside. Nothing in the building is worth going back for.

FLASH FLOOD

Turn around, don't drown

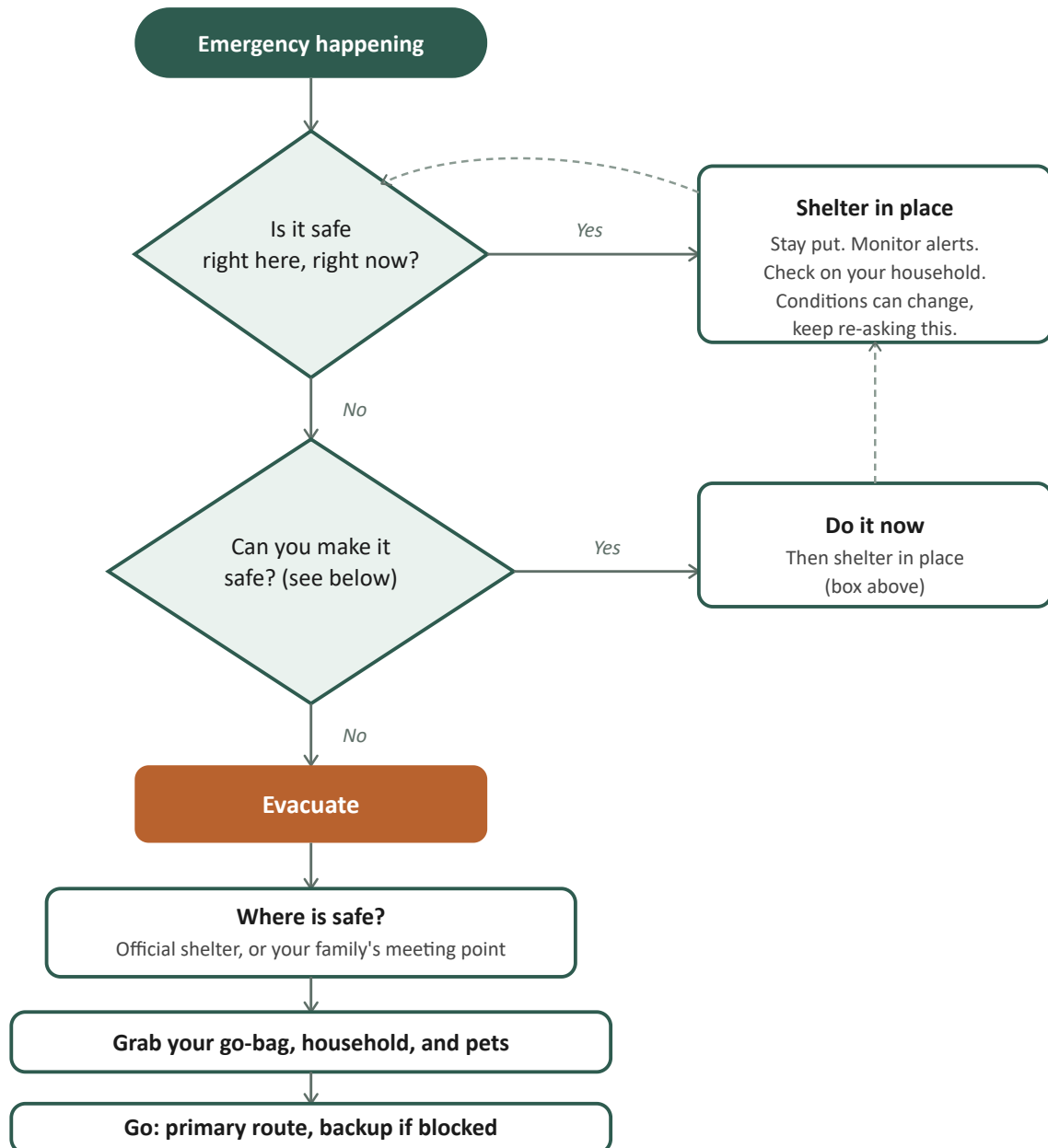
Never drive or walk into moving water. Six inches can knock an adult off their feet; twelve inches can carry off a car. Get to higher ground immediately and stay there.

Now that you've seen the four, here's a way to hold onto them: each hazard is one of the four elements.

EARTH Drop, Cover, Hold On	WIND Go Low
FIRE Go Out	WATER Turn Around, Don't Drown

Everything else: the decision tree

Wildfire approaching, a chemical release, a hurricane closing in, a winter storm, a boil-water advisory: almost everything that isn't one of the four reflexes above runs through the same basic decision, used by FEMA and Ready.gov, shelter in place, or evacuate. Here's how to work through it.



The same tree, written out

- 1. Is it safe here, right now?** If yes: shelter in place. Stay where you are, stay informed (NOAA weather radio, official alerts), and check on the rest of your household. Keep re-asking this question, since conditions can change.
- 2. If it's not safe, can you make it safe?** Shutting off a utility, sealing a room from smoke or a chemical release, or moving to an interior room away from windows, see Making it safe below for each. If yes: do that now, then treat it as sheltering in place above.
- 3. If you can't make it safe, evacuate.** Don't wait for a second warning.

4. **Where is safe?** An official shelter or evacuation route, or your own family's predetermined meeting point. See the Family Communication Plan guide if that point isn't decided yet.
5. **Grab your go-bag, your household, and your pets.** Documents, medication, water, phone and charger, cash, weather-appropriate clothing. The Document Go-Bag and Pet Evacuation guides cover exactly what goes in each.
6. **Go.** Take your primary route; have a backup in mind in case it's blocked. The Vehicle Emergency Kit guide covers what to keep in the car for exactly this. If roads aren't passable, see Physical Readiness for what it actually takes to cover distance on foot.

Making it safe: the actual steps

"Can you make it safe" covers five genuinely different situations, depending on what's actually threatening the room you're in. Pick the one that matches.

A utility is the danger: gas, water, or electrical

Full step-by-step, including where to find each shutoff before you ever need it, is already covered in Fire-Starting & Generator Safety. The short version: shut off gas only if you smell or hear it, or suspect a leak, and only from outside if you have to go back in to reach it; shut off water at the meter box by turning the valve clockwise; shut off electricity at the main breaker if you see sparking, smell burning, or the building has visible structural damage.

The air is the danger: smoke, a chemical release, or a hazmat incident nearby

This is a different, more involved version of sheltering in place, per FEMA and Ready.gov's official steps:

1. Get everyone (people and pets) inside. Lock doors, close windows, close the fireplace damper.
2. Turn off anything that moves outside air in: fans, air conditioning, forced-air heating. If your system has a "recirculate" setting instead of an off switch, use that.
3. Go to an interior room with as few windows as possible. Above ground level if you can, since many hazardous gases are heavier than air and settle low.
4. Seal the room: plastic sheeting and duct tape over windows, doors, and vents, taping corners first, then all edges. No plastic sheeting on hand? Wet towels pressed into door and window gaps are a real, genuinely useful fallback, not as effective, but worth doing.
5. Stay tuned to a radio, phone, or any working alert channel for updates.

This buys hours, not days

Officials generally don't recommend sheltering in a sealed room for more than 2 to 3 hours. Outside air gradually seeps in regardless, and past that window evacuating becomes the safer move, exactly the same decision this whole page is built around, just revisited once conditions change.

Wind or flying debris is the danger, but it's not a tornado warning

For a severe thunderstorm or derecho that doesn't rise to a tornado warning, the reflex above still doesn't apply, but the same logic does at a smaller scale: get away from windows and exterior walls, move to the lowest floor available, and put something between yourself and anything that could break, a mattress, cushions, heavy blankets. If the warning upgrades to a tornado warning, treat it as the reflex at the top of this page instead.

A direct threat is the danger: an intruder or a home invasion

This one doesn't reduce to a single action the way the others on this page do, what's actually safest depends on where the threat is and whether you can get away. DHS and Ready.gov's **Run, Hide, Fight** framework (built for an active violent threat in general, not written for a home specifically) is the closest thing to an official answer. Run and Fight map onto the same two questions this page already asks, evacuate and make it safe; Hide doesn't, and that's worth understanding rather than glossing over:

- **Run** is this tree's evacuate, and the first thing to check, but only when you can reasonably expect to actually reach safety before the threat reaches you, and that safety genuinely holds once you're there. Guess wrong on either and running just spends the energy you'd otherwise have for Hide or Fight, leaving you winded exactly when the threat catches up, worse than not running at all. When both hold, take it before anything else: leave belongings behind, and call 911 once you're actually safe, not before.
- **Fight** is this tree's make it safe: you're acting directly on the threat to end it, the same way shutting off a gas line ends that danger. DHS's own definition of Fight means specifically physical, as an absolute last resort, so try de-escalating with words first if there's any room to, that's a real, distinct step, not a softer version of Fight itself. If you're forced past that, commit fully to physical action rather than half-committing.
- **Hide** doesn't actually fit either branch. You haven't left, and you haven't neutralized anything, you're concealing yourself and hoping the danger doesn't find you, or gets resolved another way, police arriving, the threat losing interest and moving on. Get out of sight, lock and barricade the door, silence your phone, and stay quiet, but don't go fully blind or deaf either: keep enough situational awareness, a safe vantage point, listening for movement or updates, to tell whether the danger is getting closer or moving on, since that's what tells you whether to keep hiding or that it's time to reconsider Run or Fight. If you can call or text 911 without making noise or being seen, do it, a dispatcher can work with a silent call, listening for what's happening, and text-to-911 is a real option built for exactly this, though it isn't available everywhere, check ahead of time whether your area supports it. It's a real, valid choice when you can't safely run or force an end to it yourself, but don't mistake it for the same kind of safe as sealing a room from smoke or shutting off a gas line: the danger is still fully active, you're just harder to find. See Home Lockdown & Barricading Basics for the practiced routine, worth drilling before you need it, the same way the reflexes at the top of this page are.

Nearby unrest is the danger: looting, rioting, or a hostile crowd

For nearby unrest rather than a direct threat, the same hide-and-reassess logic applies: stay inside and out of direct sightlines from doors and windows rather than watching from them exposed, but check the situation from a safe angle or listen for how it's developing rather than shutting yourself off from it entirely. Don't go out for a better look, and don't engage, confront, or try to reason with anyone involved, staying uninvolved is what actually keeps you safe here, not being right.

You can't reliably tell whether someone's after property alone or something more, and treating a guess as certain is how people get hurt. Property alone still isn't worth a confrontation either way: let it go rather than stepping in, and keep reassessing rather than trusting the situation stays contained. If it gets close enough or fast enough that staying isn't safe, that's Run, if possible, don't wait for a lull to leave.

Call 911 if you're in direct danger yourself, not just to report property loss. See the Security & Self-Defense chapter for home hardening and the legal use-of-force picture once the immediate moment has passed.

If officials tell you to evacuate, that overrides this tree

Local officials sometimes see the full picture before it's obvious from inside your own house. If you're specifically told to evacuate or seek medical treatment, do that immediately rather than working back through the steps above.

The go-bag, at a glance

Not a replacement for the full Document Go-Bag guide, just the fastest possible version if you're grabbing this while already moving.

- ☐ IDs, insurance, and medical documents (or the backed-up copies)
- ☐ Medications and any medical equipment that can't be replaced quickly
- ☐ Water and any shelf-stable food you can grab fast
- ☐ Phone and charger (a portable battery if you have one)
- ☐ Cash, since card readers and ATMs may not work without power
- ☐ A change of weather-appropriate clothing per person
- ☐ Pet food, leash/carrier, and vaccination records

Most emergencies give you some warning

Earthquakes are the real exception: no warning most people can act on before the shaking starts. California, Oregon, and Washington now have ShakeAlert, a real USGS early-warning system, but it buys seconds, not minutes, and it doesn't reach the Wasatch Front. A pet reacting oddly right before the shaking starts is real too, not folklore: many animals sense the fast-moving P wave a few seconds before humans feel the slower, more damaging S wave. USGS is clear that's the extent of it, there's no reliable evidence of animals sensing anything useful hours or days ahead, so it's not something to actually watch for. Almost everything else on this page has some lead-up: a darkening sky and a wall cloud before a tornado, a red flag warning or smoke on the horizon days before a wildfire actually arrives, the smell of smoke before flames are visible in a structure fire, rising water or a change in a stream's sound before a flash flood, a gas smell before a leak becomes dangerous, unusual emergency-vehicle activity or news of unrest before it reaches your street. Noticing that lead-up is what turns Run into an actual option instead of a coin-flip, and what keeps you from needing the reflexes on this page at all.

A few habits build that awareness before you need it:

- **Know your area's actual hazards**, not a generic list. See your state's page in By State for what's actually likely where you live, and check it again if you move.
- **Sign up for local alerts**. Wireless Emergency Alerts reach any cell phone automatically, no signup required, but most cities and counties also run a separate opt-in system for local, non-federal alerts; find and register for yours. See Ready.gov for how the different alert types work.
- **Notice the ordinary signals around you**: a sky that looks wrong, a smell that wasn't there yesterday, more sirens than usual, a neighbor who seems rattled. None of these confirm anything on their own, but they're often the first real data you get, well before an official warning.

- **Take an uneasy feeling seriously instead of rationalizing it away.** Disaster researchers call this normalcy bias, underestimating a real threat because things have always been fine before, and it's one of the most consistently documented reasons people delay acting until it's too late.

Where to go deeper

- The Act of Surviving: once you're safe, what actually happens next, hour by hour and day by day, through recovery.
- Family Communication Plan: deciding your meeting point and out-of-town contact before you need one.
- Emergency Shelter Basics: what makes a room actually safe to shelter in.
- Security & Self-Defense: OPSEC, neighborhood watch, home hardening, and the legal use-of-force picture, once the immediate moment above has passed.
- Home Lockdown & Barricading Basics: the practiced routine behind "Hide" above, and the door and window reinforcement that makes it actually hold.
- By State: your own state's specific risks, laws, and evacuation resources.
- Ready, Set, Ready: if none of this is built yet, start there instead.

Sources

- Earthquake: Drop, Cover, and Hold On: Ready.gov
- Tornado shelter location and safety: Ready.gov
- Tornado safety in a mobile home or vehicle, why neither is safe shelter, and why not to use an overpass: National Weather Service
- Home fire escape, "get out, stay out": Ready.gov; U.S. Fire Administration
- "Turn Around, Don't Drown," flash flood safety: National Weather Service
- Shelter-in-place vs. evacuate decision framework: FEMA; Ready.gov
- Sealing a room, ventilation shutoff, and the 2 to 3 hour effectiveness window: Ready.gov; Ready.gov (chemical incidents); Washington State Department of Health
- Utility shutoff steps: full detail in this site's own Fire-Starting & Generator Safety guide
- Sheltering safely during nearby civil disturbance or unrest, staying away from doors/windows, not engaging: Florida State University Emergency Management
- "Run, Hide, Fight" active-threat framework (built for mass-gathering and active-shooter events, not written for a home specifically): Ready.gov

- Text-to-911 as an option when speaking isn't safe, and that coverage isn't available everywhere: FCC
- Home lockdown and barricading steps: full detail in this site's own Home Lockdown & Barricading Basics guide
- Tornado visual warning signs (wall cloud, roaring noise, hail) and their real limits, since some tornadoes give little visible warning at all: National Weather Service
- ShakeAlert earthquake early-warning system, coverage area and expected warning times: USGS
- Red flag warnings, criteria and typical 24-48 hour lead time: National Weather Service
- Animals sensing the P wave seconds before humans, and the lack of reliable evidence for any longer-range animal earthquake prediction: USGS
- Wireless Emergency Alerts and local opt-in alert systems: Ready.gov
- Normalcy bias and its role in delayed evacuation: National Academies of Sciences