

Physical Readiness for Emergencies

Not a generic fitness plan: the specific physical demands an actual emergency places on your body, and the handful of exercises that train for them directly. This is the hands-on side of the Fitness chapter and its addendum.

What an emergency actually demands physically

Evacuating on foot, carrying water or supplies over distance, clearing debris, or helping move an injured person all draw on the same underlying capacities: leg and back strength, a stable core, grip strength, and the cardiovascular stamina to keep working under stress rather than perform one all-out effort. This is the same reasoning first responders use to train functionally rather than for appearance or a single fitness metric.

The exercises that train for it directly

- **The farmer's carry.** Pick up a heavy object in each hand (a loaded pack, a pair of jugs of water, dedicated weights) and walk for distance or time. This is close to a direct simulation of carrying supplies or a bug-out bag, and builds grip strength, core stability, and the specific muscular endurance that matters most. Start light: roughly a quarter of your bodyweight per hand at most, for a first session, walking about 20 to 40 meters (a short block, or a distance you can mark off in a yard or driveway). Do 3 sets with 90 seconds of rest between them. Add weight before you add distance as it gets easier, not both at once.
- **Loaded carries over uneven terrain,** a sandbag, a duffel, anything with weight that shifts unpredictably as you move it. The instability itself is the point: it trains the same stabilizing muscles you'd use carrying an awkward load or an injured person, not just raw strength.
- **Walking for distance with a loaded pack.** Work toward being able to walk 3 to 5 miles comfortably while carrying a real load, roughly what your own bug-out bag actually weighs, not an empty one. Start from your current comfortable walking distance, not from zero, and add distance gradually, roughly 10% more per week, rather than jumping straight to a multi-mile loaded walk in your first session.

Watch it: Runna, "Farmer's Carry Tutorial - Proper Form and Technique".

TIP

Break in the actual shoes in your go-bag before you need to walk in them

A blister that would just be annoying on a normal day can turn a multi-mile evacuation on foot into a real problem. Wear the shoes or boots you'd actually grab for 30 to 45 minutes around the house on day one, then add 20 to 30 minutes each following day until you've done a full day comfortably, and take them on a few short real walks before trusting them for distance. Thick, moisture-wicking socks and a blister patch over any spot that starts rubbing prevent most of the damage before it starts.

Start with what you can actually do

None of this requires a gym or a structured program to begin. A loaded backpack and a walk around the neighborhood is a real farmer's-carry-adjacent workout. The goal is a body that can do what an emergency asks of it, not a specific number on any single exercise. If you have an existing heart, back, or joint condition, check with a doctor before starting loaded carry work specifically, the combined grip, core, and cardiovascular demand is real exertion, not a gentle warmup.

For older adults, balance matters more than load-bearing

Falls are the leading cause of injury death for adults 65 and older, and an emergency raises fall risk directly: debris, uneven ground, darkened stairwells, and unfamiliar temporary shelter all remove the predictable footing most falls are avoided by. For this group, the highest-value physical preparation isn't the loaded carries above; it's balance and lower-body strength training aimed specifically at fall prevention.

- **Balance practice:** tai chi, yoga, or simply standing on one foot near a counter for support, done regularly, measurably reduces fall risk. A real starting target: hold each side for 10 seconds, working up to 30 seconds, for 3 holds per side, daily.
- **Lower-body strength:** sit-to-stand repetitions from a chair, or light resistance-band work, build the specific strength that prevents a stumble from becoming a fall. A real starting target: 2 to 3 sets of 8 to 10 repetitions, using your hands on the chair's arms or seat for support at first and working toward doing it hands-free as it gets easier. The CDC's own STEADI program recommends this kind of balance and strength work 2 to 3 times a week.
- **Address what makes falls more likely** alongside the exercise itself: get vision and hearing checked regularly, since even small declines in either raise fall risk, and ask a doctor or pharmacist whether any current medication causes dizziness or drowsiness.

None of this replaces the value of being able to carry a load if you're able to; it's a matter of which physical capacity actually reduces your risk most, and for many older adults that's staying on your feet, not how much you can carry while doing it.

Sleep debt is a real cost during a sustained response, not something to push through

Everything above trains the body. This is about protecting the part of you that decides what to do with it. Sleep deprivation measurably degrades decision-making, not just alertness: it shifts choices toward riskier options, slows reaction time, and pushes people toward mental shortcuts under exactly the kind of uncertainty a disaster creates. This is the same decision-fatigue cost the Act of Surviving's Tier 2 guidance names for a household running a sustained response over weeks; a fixed sleep rotation, decided once rather than renegotiated every night, addresses both the physical and the decision-quality problem at the same time.

- **If someone needs to be awake overnight** for security, a sick household member, or monitoring conditions, split sleep into two blocks rather than one interrupted one, the military's own watch-rotation research on sustained operations shows split sleep that totals 7–9 hours works about as well as one continuous block, while an irregular, constantly-renegotiated schedule measurably hurts mood and reaction time compared to a fixed rotation.
- **A short nap works when a full block isn't available.** About 20 minutes is the real sweet spot: long enough to restore alertness for roughly 2–3 hours, short enough to avoid the grogginess of waking from deeper sleep, the same guidance the Army's own fatigue-management training uses for sustained operations.
- **Decide the rotation in advance, then follow it,** the same "decided once, not re-decided daily" principle the Extended Plan applies to the household's other standing responsibilities. Assign who covers which hours before the first night, not by whoever's still awake when it matters.

Write your own plan, in one sentence

A body that can do what an emergency asks of it is built in advance, not discovered in the moment. Finish this sentence with your own real plan:

"This week, I will practice a loaded farmer's carry, starting with 20 meters, 3 sets."

Know someone this guide would actually help? Being the person who's ready includes being the person who says something.

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Sources

- Functional fitness training principles for emergency and first-responder readiness, farmer's carry and loaded-carry rationale: EMS1; Guilford Athletic Center
- CDC and National Institute on Aging, older-adult fall statistics and balance/strength fall-prevention guidance: CDC; National Institute on Aging
- Farmer's carry beginner starting weight, distance, and set/rep progression: Garage Gym Reviews; Vitality
- Sit-to-stand and single-leg balance rep/hold targets, CDC STEADI program frequency: Johns Hopkins Medicine
- Shoe break-in schedule and blister-prevention technique: Cotswold Outdoor; Mammut
- Sleep deprivation's effect on decision-making (riskier choices, slower reaction time, greater reliance on heuristics): PMC, scoping review of sleep deprivation and decision-making
- Split-sleep and fixed watch-rotation schedules outperforming irregular ones in sustained operations: Brown, Matsangas & Shattuck, Navy watch-schedule research
- 20-minute tactical nap guidance for sustained operations: U.S. Army, WRAIR Tactical Naps