

Preparing for extreme weather: Don't wait until it's too late

By Teddi Nicolaus

Dangerous record-breaking heat. Heavier downpours. More intense hurricanes, tornadoes and cold snaps. More frequent droughts and wildfires.

Sound familiar? They're called "extreme weather events," and no matter where you live there's a good chance you've experienced one. In fact, a poll found that the vast majority of Americans say they've personally been affected by at least one extreme weather event in the past five years.

Human activities such as burning oil and coal have caused Earth's temperature to change, leading to more frequent and more intense weather events around the world.

Daily and seasonal weather patterns play a role too. Climate scientists define extreme weather events as those that produce unusually high or low levels of rain, snow, temperature, wind or other effects and differ significantly from previously recorded weather in a region.

"If you look at all the major scientific assessments, there absolutely is evidence that climate change is affecting extreme weather," says John Kotcher, a professor in the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University.

Extreme heat is the most dangerous type of extreme weather event in the U.S. According to the National Weather Service, extreme heat claimed the lives of nearly 200 people in 2021. Flash floods came in second, followed by extreme cold and tornadoes.

As our weather gets weirder, wilder and more intense, different regions of the country will be affected in different ways, and some more than others. But no matter where you live, you'll need to be prepared. According to the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention, extreme weather can cause increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease, water-borne illnesses, injuries and infections, and can threaten mental health.

Be ready for anything

Being prepared is the most effective thing you can do to help yourself and your family stay safe during extreme weather.

"Extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and intensity each year," says Stephanie Fox, national media lead for the American Red Cross. "In every community, whether you've had that type of extreme weather before or not, there is no telling if you're going to see it at some point in your lifetime, so preparedness is key."

Preparing for extreme weather events comes down to three main things: building a kit, making a plan and staying informed.

A basic emergency supply kit should include water — one gallon per person and pet per day for at least three days — enough non-perishable food to last several days, a battery-powered radio and extra batteries, a flashlight and a first-aid kit. Preparation also includes creating an emergency plan with your household and staying in the loop with emergency alerts.

"You have to be prepared for the unknown all the time," Fox says. "Even in communities that are not predisposed to having these types of weather events, knowing your risk factor in your community for what could potentially happen can be very empowering and can help you make decisions as you keep tabs on what the weather is doing and knowing what actions you need to take."

Take it a step further

Global leaders are working to slow climate change, but estimates show we have a long way to go. In the meantime, extreme weather events will become more common.

An increasing number of people in the U.S. say they may move from areas that are likely to be affected by global warming. Weather-related moves may become more common in general.



>> For more on extreme weather, visit www.cdc.gov/disasters

But before you pack up and head somewhere else, take a look at where weather is expected to get worse. You don't want to leave an area with growing wildfire risks just to end up in a place with worsening hurricanes.

Check out these other extreme weather tips:

- ◆ Don't move into a high-risk flood zone, and if you already live in one, make sure to buy flood insurance. The Federal Emergency Management Agency shares maps online that can tell you what areas have the highest risk of flooding. Look for ways to keep your home safe from flooding, such as installing a sump pump and use check valves on sewer lines to keep floodwater from backing up inside.

- ◆ If you live in an area with frequent wildfires, look for ways to reduce risks around your home, such as removing plants that are close to structures, and be ready to evacuate quickly. If you're in an area at risk for droughts, look into rain barrels and water recycling.

- ◆ With intense heat waves becoming more common in places that don't usually have them, you may be considering installing air conditioning. If so, look for eco-friendly products. Another option is heat pumps, which move warm indoor air outside to cool a building, and are considered a more climate friendly choice.

- ◆ Get informed about the growing risks of extreme weather and talk to your local and state leaders about ways your community can stay safe as weather becomes more dangerous.

Photos courtesy iStockphoto: Fire by Bilanol; man in heat wave, Thebigland88; couple with home, Monkeybusinessimages; snowstorm, Edditoro; flooding, CHKnox

