

Healthy Living as a Critical Part of Emergency Preparedness



Introduction

Highlights

- Personal and family health challenges, such as managing chronic conditions, accessing medications, or maintaining mobility, are frequently overlooked aspects of emergency preparedness.
- Individuals in good physical health change the trajectory of disaster response in their communities.
- Healthy individuals are more capable of evacuating, meeting their own needs, and withstanding the physical and emotional stress of emergencies.
- A proactive investment in health today is not only a personal safeguard but also a contribution to a stronger, more resilient community when emergencies occur.

When preparing for an emergency, the focus is often on stockpiling supplies, creating family emergency plans, and identifying evacuation routes or shelter locations. Local communities establish alert systems and transparent communication networks to support these efforts. However, while logistics are essential, personal and family health challenges, such as managing chronic conditions, accessing medications, or maintaining mobility, are frequently overlooked. These factors can significantly affect an individual's ability to evacuate, access care, and recover from disasters. Guidance for at-risk populations is a critical component of emergency planning (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 2018).

This resource presents practical, health-focused actions that individuals and caregivers can take to strengthen resilience before, during, and after emergencies. By integrating both long-term wellness habits and short-term

readiness strategies, it supports a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to disaster preparedness, one that enhances not only personal outcomes but also community-wide response capacity.

Chronic Disease and Emergency Preparedness

Approximately 6 in 10 U.S. adults live with at least one chronic disease, and 4 in 10 have multiple chronic conditions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023a). This equates to more than 194 million Americans who may require specialized treatment during emergencies. During disasters, symptoms often worsen due to stress, disrupted access to services, lack of medications or therapies, and higher risk of infection (Gichomo, 2019; Shin & Ji, 2021).

Past events show that people with chronic illnesses frequently require more emergency services. Reduced mobility, low aerobic fitness, and reliance on caregivers make it harder for many to meet their own needs. Obesity is of particular concern. Nationally, about 42% of adults are obese, while Utah's rate is 32% (CDC, 2020; University of Utah Health, 2024). Obesity can limit physically strenuous activity (walking, running, lifting), and co-occurring conditions may necessitate specialized equipment (e.g., oxygen, dialysis, inhalers), complicating evacuation and care (Gray & MacDonald, 2016). Stress can also exacerbate a range of chronic conditions, including diabetes, dementia-related diseases, arthritis, and other mobility-related disorders, by triggering inflammatory responses, disrupting medication routines, and worsening symptoms (Alexander et al., 2025; National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2022; National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health [NCCIH], 2025; Iyer et al., 2025).

Disasters strain not only individuals but also public health systems. People with chronic diseases often require specialized caregivers, yet shortages during emergencies can lead to increased suffering or even death (Gray & MacDonald, 2016). Individuals with diabetes should adhere to recommended care standards and ensure access to necessary supplies (American Diabetes Association [ADA], 2022).

Healthy Living as a Preparedness Strategy

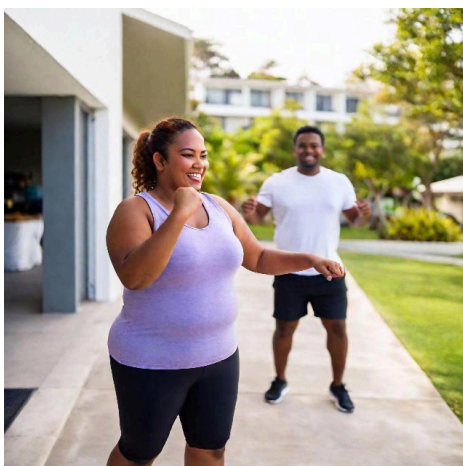
Individuals in good physical health change the trajectory of disaster response in their communities. Healthy individuals

are more capable of evacuating, meeting their own needs, and withstanding the physical and emotional stress of emergencies. By reducing their reliance on emergency responders, they allow critical resources to be directed to those who are seriously injured or disabled. Healthy individuals can also become assets, assisting others rather than needing assistance themselves (Gichomo, 2019).

Good nutrition builds stronger immune systems to resist infection in shelters. Regular exercise improves stamina, endurance, and agility. Vaccinations reduce the risk of illness and help prevent severe disease. Maintaining health also reduces the need for scarce medications and services during emergencies.

Action Items to Improve Health and Disaster Readiness

Long-Term Preparedness



- **Exercise regularly.** Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week to improve cardiovascular health, strength, and endurance. Exercising regularly is important for emergencies requiring physical exertion (CDC, 2022).
- **Eat a balanced diet.** A nutritious diet supports immune function and helps the body manage stress during emergencies (CDC, 2022).
- **Stay current on vaccinations.** Immunizations reduce the risk of preventable diseases and are especially critical during disasters when access to healthcare may be limited and exposure risks increase (CDC, 2025b).
- **Maintain a medication supply.** Keep at least a 30-day supply of essential medications; a 90-day supply is preferable. Maintain an up-to-date list of all prescriptions, including dosage, prescribing provider,

and pharmacy contact information. This facilitates quick communication with healthcare providers or emergency responders if refills are needed during a disaster (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 2020; U.S. Food and Drug Administration [FDA], 2025).

- **Plan for continuation of care.** Identify backup options for treatments such as dialysis, oxygen therapy, or infusions. Discuss emergency care plans with your healthcare provider, especially if your treatment requires electricity or specialized equipment (CDC, 2025; Healthcare Ready, 2025).
- **Stay informed.** Use official sources for disaster alerts and health guidance. Access reliable disaster information through official channels such as FEMA and local emergency management agencies (FEMA, 2018). Trusted channels include:
 - [FEMA](#)
 - [Ready.gov](#)
 - [CDC Emergency Preparedness](#)
 - Local emergency management websites and social media accounts

Short-Term Readiness

- **Check prescriptions now.** Review your medications and ask your provider to call in refills. In emergencies, many pharmacies can provide a short-term supply of noncontrolled medications without a new prescription (Healthcare Ready, 2025).
- **Register for specialized shelters.** If your state offers medical or special-needs shelters, register in advance through local emergency services or a Functional Needs Registry. This ensures access to appropriate care and accommodations during evacuations (Hope Force International, 2025).
- **Stock special foods and beverages.** If you have dietary restrictions, use “buy one, get one” (BOGO) deals to build a small emergency stash, consume one now, save one for your “go kit.”
- **Create a basic health go kit.** Include the following:
 - Medication list and extra prescriptions.
 - Contact information for providers.
 - Hand sanitizer and masks.
 - Medical devices or supplies.
 - Flash drive with digital health records (FEMA, 2020).



Conclusion

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is a critical component of emergency preparedness. Individuals who prioritize their health through preventive care, physical activity, and readiness planning are better equipped to respond effectively during disasters, reduce reliance on scarce medical resources, and support community resilience. By adopting both long-term wellness habits and short-term preparedness measures, individuals can significantly improve outcomes for themselves and others. A proactive investment in health today is not only a personal safeguard but also a contribution to a stronger, more resilient community when emergencies occur. A small investment in personal health today can make a significant difference when disaster strikes.

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