



# FLOODS THE AWESOME POWER



The Great Flood of 1993

Top Photo: Scott Dines, St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Bottom Photo: Jim Rackwitz, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**  
**National Weather Service**  
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## Why Should I be Concerned About Flooding?

This preparedness guide explains flood-related hazards and suggests life-saving actions you can take. With this information you can recognize a flood potential, develop a plan, and be ready when threatening weather approaches. Remember...your safety is up to **YOU!**

In the long term, floods kill more people in the United States than other types of severe weather. In recent years, only heat surpassed flood fatalities. Floods can roll boulders the size of cars, tear out trees, destroy buildings and bridges, and pose a significant threat to human lives.

### Online Resources

Additional flash flood/flood-related safety information can be obtained at:

**American Red Cross:**  
<http://www.redcross.org/>

**U.S. Geological Survey:**  
<http://www.usgs.gov/>

**Federal Emergency Management Agency:**  
<http://www.fema.gov/>

**National Weather Service:**  
<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/>

"Flooding never happens here. Tom was trying to get home. He drives on the road near the stream every day. We knew it had been raining a lot, but it had been so dry, we were actually happy about the rain. Tom saw some water on the road, but thought it wasn't that deep. And, after all, he was in his truck, high up off the ground. But then his truck started to float, and before he knew it, his truck was washed downstream with him in it. Fortunately, his truck got stuck on a rock or something, and someone saw him and threw him a line. Tom got out okay. But we really learned from this, not to drive in floods."

*- Testimony of Marilyn and Tom (last name requested to be withheld), interviewed by the American Red Cross after Tropical Storm Allison struck Texas in June 2001*



River Flooding

## What are Flash Floods?

A flash flood is a rapid rise of water along a stream or low-lying urban area. Flash flood damage and most fatalities tend to occur in areas immediately adjacent to a stream or arroyo, due to a combination of heavy rain, dam break, levee failure, rapid snowmelt, and ice jams. Additionally, heavy rain falling on steep terrain can weaken soil and cause mud slides, damaging homes, roads, and property.

Flash floods can be produced when slow moving or multiple thunderstorms occur over the same area. When storms move faster, flash flooding is less likely since the rain is distributed over a broader area.

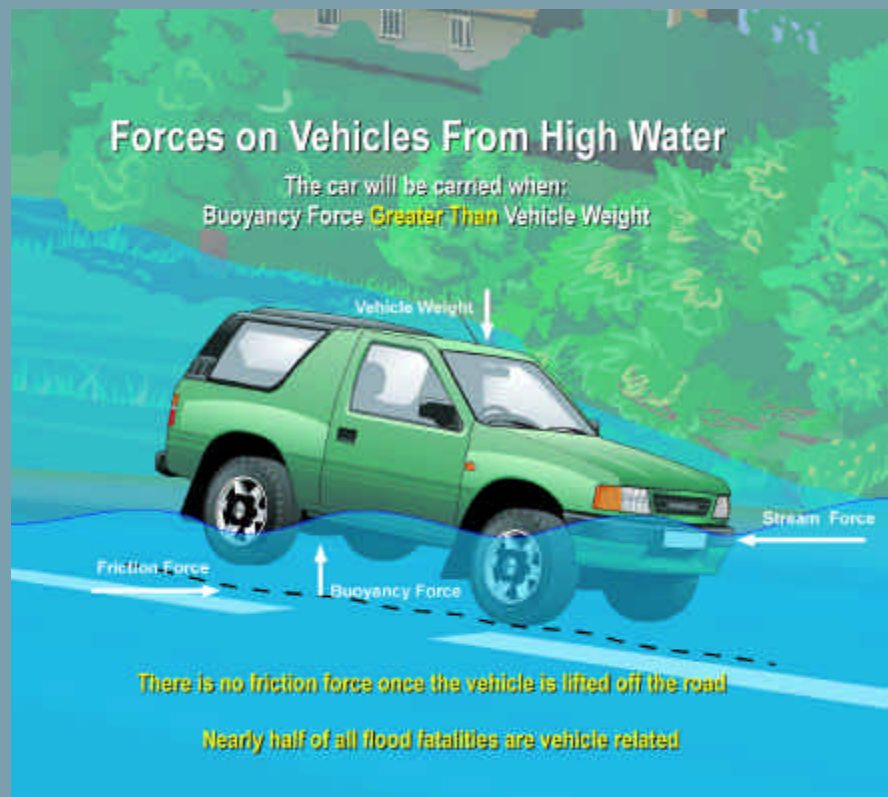
## Flash Flood Risk in Your Car, Truck, or Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV)

Almost half of all flash flood fatalities occur in vehicles. Contrary to popular belief, many people don't realize two feet of water on a bridge or highway can float most vehicles. If the water is moving rapidly, the car, truck, or SUV can be swept off the bridge and into the creek.

Water can erode the road bed creating unsafe driving conditions. Underpasses can fill rapidly with water, while the adjacent roadway remains clear. Driving into a flooded underpass can quickly put you in 5-6 feet of water. Many flash floods occur at night when flooded roads are difficult to see.

When you approach a flooded road, **TURN AROUND AND GO ANOTHER WAY!**

**Barricades are put up for your protection. Turn around and go another way!**



## Flash Flood Risks at Home, Work, or School

Since many flash floods occur along small streams, you can determine your risk by knowing your proximity to streams. Flooding can be caused by rain falling several miles upstream and then moving downstream rapidly.

Densely populated areas have a high risk for flash floods. The construction of buildings, highways, driveways, and parking lots increases runoff by reducing the amount of rain absorbed by the ground. This runoff increases the flash flood potential. Sometimes, streams through cities and towns are routed underground into storm drains. During periods of heavy rainfall, storm drains may become overwhelmed and flood roads and buildings. Low spots, such as underpasses, underground parking garages, and basements can become death traps.

Embankments, known as levees, are built along rivers and are used to prevent high water from flooding bordering land. In 1993, many levees failed along the Mississippi River, resulting in devastating flash floods.

Dam failures have played a deadly role in the history of flash flooding. The United States has about 76,000 dams, and about 80 percent of those are

earthfill construction. Be aware of any dams upstream of your location. Earthen dams are more easily compromised by heavy rainfall than are concrete structures. Water flowing over an earthen dam can cause the dam to weaken or fail, sending a destructive wall of water downstream.

## Flash Flood Risk to Recreation (Camping, Hiking, Boating, Fishing)

Many people enjoy hiking, fishing, or camping along streams and rivers. Listen to weather forecasts and keep away from streams if thunderstorms have happened or have been predicted upstream from where you are. A creek only 6 inches deep in mountainous areas can swell to a 10-foot deep raging river in less than an hour if a thunderstorm inundates the area with intense rainfall.

When thunderstorms are in the area, stay alert for rapidly changing conditions. You may notice the stream start to rise quickly and become muddy. You may hear a roaring sound upstream that may be a flood wave moving rapidly toward you. Head immediately for higher ground. Don't be swept away by the rising water. There are dangers associated with fast-moving water, but with common sense and some preparation, outdoor enthusiasts can enjoy a safe day along a stream or river.

## Major Flash Flood Disasters in United States History

### May 31, 1889

A dam above Johnstown, PA, failed sending a huge flood wave through the city, killing 2,200 residents.

### February 26, 1972

The Buffalo Creek Dam, located in southern West Virginia, collapsed sending a black wave of water through one coal mining town after another killing more than 100 people and leaving 4,000 people homeless.

### July 31, 1976

Big Thompson Canyon Flash Flood resulted in 145 deaths. A storm dumped a foot of rain into the canyon, producing a raging torrent of water 19 feet high.

WATER LEVEL (FEET)

15

14

13

12

11

10

9

8

7

## Where You Are Determines Your Flash Flood/Flood Risk

Mountains and steep hills produce rapid runoff and quick stream response. Rocks and clay soils do not allow much water to infiltrate the ground. Steep narrow valleys generate rapid flowing waters that can rise quickly to a considerable depth. Saturated soil also can lead rapidly to flash flooding.

Very intense rainfall can produce flooding even on dry soil. In the West, most canyons and "small streams" are not easily recognizable as a source of danger. Canyons can be scoured with sudden walls of water 10-15 feet high (e.g., Antelope Canyon, Arizona, August 1997, 11 fatalities).

Additionally, high risk locations include low water crossings, recent burn areas in mountains, and urban areas from pavement and roofs which concentrate rainfall runoff.

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**Listen for a roaring sound upstream as flood waters could be headed your way!**

**Look for rapidly rising water and/or water turning muddy!**

**Remember to climb to safety if you hear or see signs of a flood!**

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Road damage as a result of flash flooding

## What are River Floods?

A flood is the inundation of a normally dry area caused by an increased water level in an established watercourse. River flooding is often caused by:

- ✓ Excessive rain from tropical systems making landfall.
- ✓ Persistent thunderstorms over the same graphical area for extended periods of time.
- ✓ Combined rainfall and snowmelt.
- ✓ Ice Jam.

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**Persistent thunderstorms over the same graphical area can lead to river flooding**

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River flooding due to excessive rain

Photo: Jim Rackwitz, St. Louis Post-Dispatch



River flooding due to ice jam

Photo: Steve Allen Photography, Waitsfield, VT



River flooding due to combined rainfall and snowmelt

Photo: Steve Allen Photography, Waitsfield, VT

## Tropical Cyclones and Their Remnants

Floods are often produced by hurricanes, tropical storms, and tropical depressions. A tropical cyclone's worst impact may be the inland flooding associated with torrential rains.

When these storms move inland, they are typically accompanied by very heavy rain. If the decaying storms move slowly over land, they can produce rainfall amounts of 20 to 40 inches over several days. Widespread flash flooding and river flooding can result from these slow-moving storms.

A hurricane also can produce a deadly storm surge that inundates coastal areas as it makes landfall. Storm surge is water pushed on shore by the force of the winds swirling around the storm. This advancing surge combines with the normal tides to create the hurricane storm tide, which can increase the average water level 15 feet or more.

The greatest natural disaster in the United States, in terms of loss of life, was caused by a storm surge and associated coastal flooding from the great Galveston, Texas, hurricane of 1900. At least 8,000 people lost their lives.



Coastal Flooding

Deaths from hurricane coastal flooding have fallen dramatically in recent years, but storm surge remains a great threat.

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**Floods are long term events  
and may last days, weeks,  
or LONGER!**

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**“50% of deaths  
associated with *tropical cyclones*  
are a result of  
INLAND FLOODING  
over the last 30 years”**

- Ed Rappaport, National Hurricane Center

<b>1972</b> <b>Hurricane Agnes</b> <b>122 deaths</b> Agnes produced floods in the Northeast United States contributing to \$6.4 billion in damages.	<b>1994</b> <b>Tropical Storm Alberto</b> <b>33 deaths</b> Alberto drifted over the Southeast United States, producing torrential rainfall and drowning 33 people. Damages exceeded \$750 million dollars.	<b>1999</b> <b>Hurricane Floyd</b> <b>56 deaths</b> Floyd brought intense rains and record flooding to the Eastern United States. Of the 56 people who perished, 50 drowned from inland flooding.	<b>2001</b> <b>Tropical Storm Allison</b> <b>44 deaths</b> Allison flooded the coastal sections from the Gulf Coast to New England. More than 3 feet of rain was reported along the Gulf Coast.
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## Stay Informed

Listen to National Oceanic and Atmospheric and Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio, commercial radio, television, or go to the Internet for the latest flash flood and flood WATCHES, WARNINGS, and WEATHER ADVISORIES at: <http://iwin.nws.noaa.gov/iwin/nationalwarnings.html>

For planning purposes, Flood Hazard Map information is only a click away by going to the Federal Emergency Management Agency Web page at: <http://www.fema.gov/mit/tsd>

## The Advanced Hydrologic Prediction Service (AHPS)

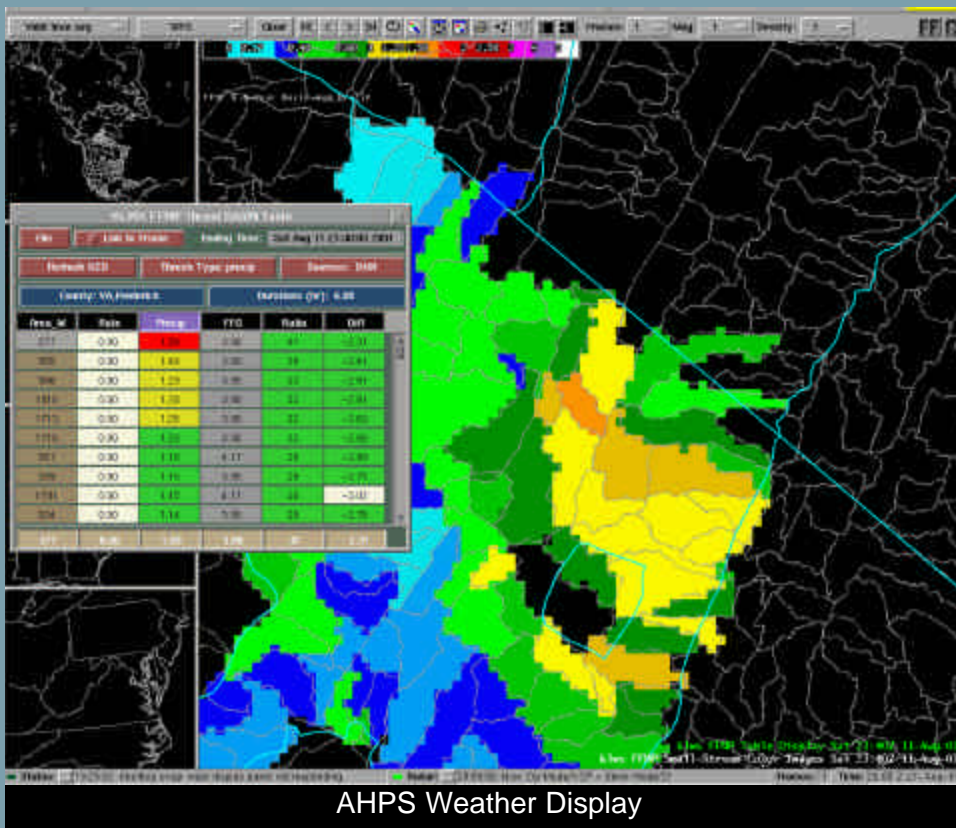
AHPS of the National Weather Service provides improved river and flood forecasting and water information. AHPS has a suite of new graphical internet products to assist community leaders and emergency managers in making better life and cost-savings decisions about evacuating people and moving property before a flood occurs.

AHPS major themes:

- ✓ Short term through long-term forecasts (from minutes to months including probabilistic products for risk management decisions).
- ✓ Real-time flood forecast maps depicting areal extent of flooding.
- ✓ More timely and accurate flash flood warnings through the use of enhanced flash flood decision assistance tools.

According to the National Hydrologic Warning Council report, "Use and Benefits of the National Weather Service River and Flood Forecasts," AHPS, once fully implemented throughout the United States, will provide more than \$750 million in economic benefits each year.

Additional AHPS information can be obtained at: <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/water/Ahps.shtml>



AHPS Weather Display





## Community Preparedness Plans

After you have developed a personal/family safety plan, find out about your community safety plan. Each community prone to a flash flood/flood should develop a safety plan. Local officials should have detailed information for your immediate area. Please listen and follow their recommendations before, during, and after a storm.

The best way to prevent loss of life is to design and build communities where roads remain usable and undamaged during floods, and where homes and businesses are protected. While this may not always be possible, it is a goal we hope every community strives to reach.

Protect yourself, your home, your family, and your financial future.



To help America prepare for the ravages of flash floods and floods, the National Weather Service has designed StormReady, to arm America's communities with the communication and safety skills necessary to save lives and property.



More information is available at:  
<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/stormready>

## National Flood Insurance Program

One of the most important things you can do to protect your home and family before a flood is to purchase a flood insurance policy. You can obtain one through your insurance company or agent. Your agent can tell you whether the standard or preferred policy (for medium or low risk) is most appropriate for you. Flood insurance is backed by the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Your homeowners insurance does not cover flood damage. Everyone has some flood risk and anyone in a participating community is eligible. Don't wait until a flood is coming to purchase your policy. It normally takes 30 days after purchase for a flood insurance policy to go into effect. For more information about the NFIP and flood insurance, contact your insurance company or call the NFIP at 1-800-427-4661.

Check with your city or county government (start with the Building or Planning Office) to find out if you live in a participating community and what flood risk information is available where you live.

## What My Community Can Do

- ✓ Provide river and rainfall readings to emergency managers and the National Weather Service.
- ✓ Establish early warning procedures.
- ✓ Create and operate a Local Flood Warning System to identify areas vulnerable to flooding.
- ✓ Produce and follow the flood emergency action plans:

Contact your local emergency management agency or local National Weather Service office for further information on Local Flood Warning Systems, or visit:

<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/oh/docs/alfws-handbook>

## Streamgage Data Save Lives

National Weather Service forecasters rely on a network of almost 10,000 streamgages to monitor the height of rivers and streams across the Nation. This information provides present river conditions and is the initial information needed to develop a river forecast. Most of the streamgages are maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Department of Agriculture. Some streamgages are read manually by dedicated volunteer observers. If you would like to volunteer as a cooperative observer visit the web site at:

<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/coop/become.htm>

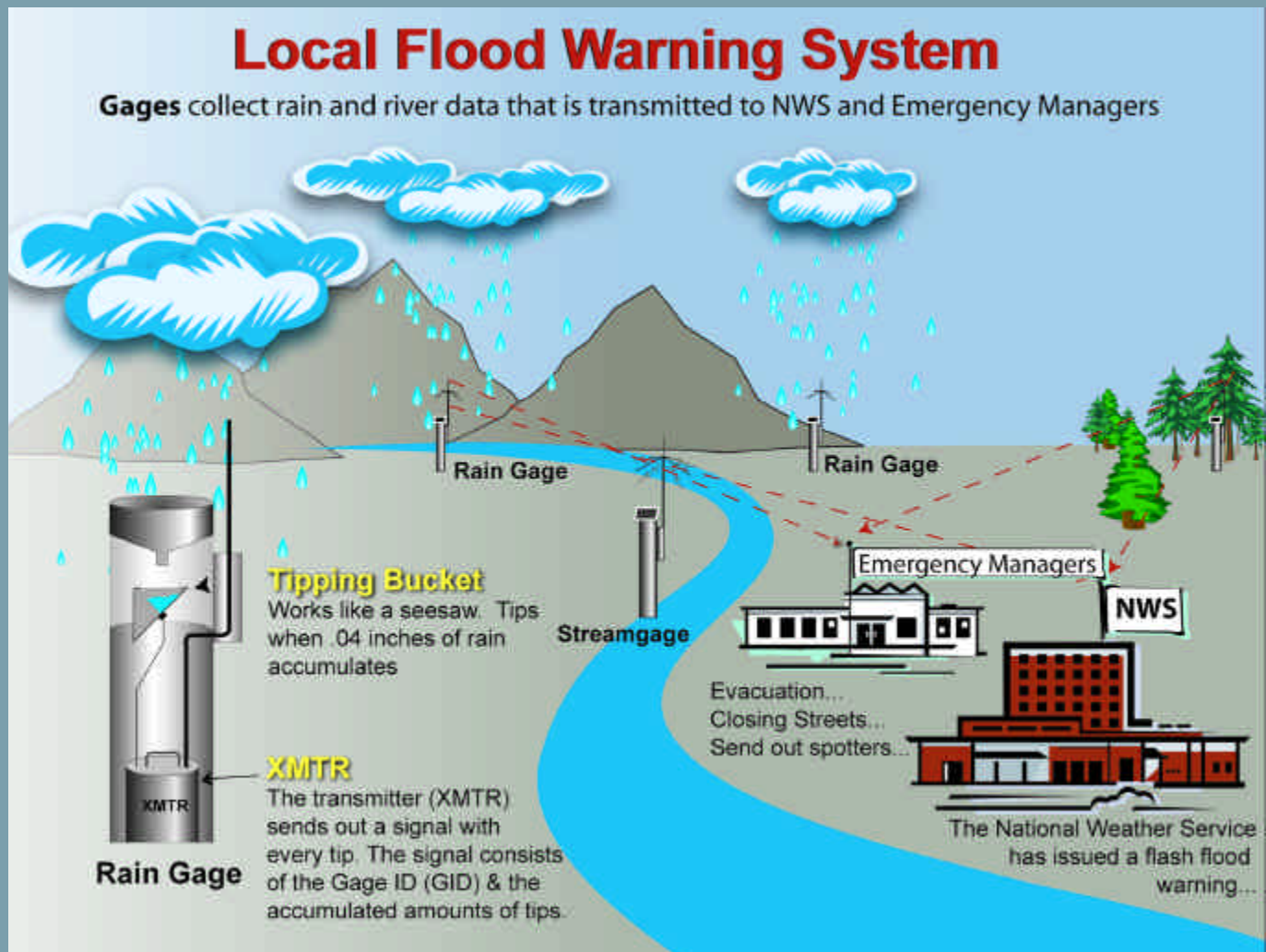
Many communities nationwide have partnered with the National Weather Service and other federal agencies (e.g., U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Army Corps

of Engineers) to implement dense networks of precipitation gages and streamgages to monitor and detect flooding in their community. These networks are often referred to as Local Flood Warning Systems.

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National Weather Service forecasters rely on a network of almost 10,000 streamgages to monitor the height of rivers and streams across the Nation

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## What You Can Do Before the Flood...

### When you receive a Flood Watch:

- ✓ A Watch is issued when flooding is possible within the watch area. When a flood watch is issued, you should be aware of potential flood hazards. Everyone in a Watch area should be ready to respond and act quickly.
- ✓ Have an evacuation plan in place BEFORE flooding occurs. Flooded roads may cut off your escape route. Head for higher ground before the water becomes too deep. Remember - just six inches of rapidly flowing water can knock you off your feet. For information on how or what to do if you are advised to evacuate, visit the American Red Cross Web page at:  
<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/beprepared/evacuation.html>
- ✓ Know your flood risk and the elevation above which flooding occurs. Do streams or rivers near you flood easily? If so, be prepared to move to a safe place. Know your evacuation routes.
- ✓ Find out if you are located in a high, medium, or low flood risk area. Check with your city or county government to find out if your community is participating in the National Flood Insurance Program. Start with the Building or Planning Department to review the Flood Insurance Rate Maps, published by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- ✓ Develop an evacuation plan. Everyone in your family should know where to go if they have to leave.



Major Flooding from Tropical Storm Allison in Houston, Texas, June 2001

- ✓ Discuss flood plans with your family. Everyone should know what to do in case all family members are not together. Discussing flood plans ahead of time helps reduce fear and anxiety and lets everyone know how to respond.
- ✓ Determine if the roads you normally travel to reach your home or job will be flooded during a storm. If so, look for alternative routes to use during flooding.
- ✓ Keep a NOAA Weather Radio, a battery-powered portable radio, emergency cooking equipment, and flashlights in working order.
- ✓ Have a professional install check-valves in plumbing to prevent flood waters from backing up into the drains of your home.
- ✓ Keep your automobile fueled; if electric power is cut off, gas stations may not be able to operate pumps for days.
- ✓ Store drinking water in food-grade containers. Water service may be interrupted.
- ✓ Keep a stock of food requiring little cooking and no refrigeration; electric power may be interrupted.
- ✓ Keep first-aid supplies and prescription medicines on hand.

## Myth OR Fact

### Myth

A 100-year flood occurs only once every 100 years.

### Fact

The 100-year flood is a climatic average; there is a 1% chance that a 100-year flood will occur in any given year.

### Myth

Flash floods mainly occur in the eastern United States.

### Fact

Flash floods occur in all 50 states, including Alaska and Hawaii.

### Myth

Flash floods occur only along flowing streams.

### Fact

Flash floods can occur in dry arroyos and urban areas where no streams are present.

### Myth

Flash floods occur mainly in the late afternoon and evening.

### Fact

Many flash floods occur at night.

### Myth

Homeowners insurance policies cover flooding.

### Fact

Unfortunately, many homeowners do not find out until it is too late that their policies do not cover flooding. Contact your insurance company or agent to buy flood insurance.

### Myth

You can't buy flood insurance if your property has been flooded.

### Fact

You are still eligible to purchase flood insurance after your home, apartment, or business has been flooded, provided your community is participating in the National Flood Insurance Program.

### Myth

Larger vehicles, such as SUVs and pickups are safe to drive through flood waters.

### Fact

Two feet of rushing water can carry away most vehicles including SUVs and pickups.

## What You Can Do During the Flood...

### When you receive a Flood Warning:

- ✓ If advised to evacuate, do so immediately! Families should use only one vehicle to avoid getting separated and reduce traffic jams. Move to a safe area before access is cut off by flood water. Continue listening to NOAA Weather Radio, radio, or television for information concerning the flooding.
- ✓ Don't drive if you don't have to.
- ✓ Get out of areas subject to flooding. This includes dips, low spots, canyons, washes, etc. Do not attempt to cross flowing streams.
- ✓ Never try to walk, swim, drive, or play in flood water. You may not be able to see how fast the flood water is moving or see holes or submerged debris.
- ✓ Do not camp or park your vehicle along streams and washes, particularly during threatening conditions.
- ✓ Be especially cautious at night when it is harder to recognize flood dangers.
- ✓ Do not attempt to drive through a flooded road. The depth of water is not always obvious. The road bed may be washed out under the water, and you could be stranded or trapped.
- ✓ Do not drive around a barricade. Barricades are there for your protection. Turn around and go another way!
- ✓ If the vehicle stalls, leave it immediately and move to higher ground. Rapidly rising water may engulf the vehicle and its occupants sweeping them away. Vehicles can be swept away by as little as 2 feet of water.
- ✓ Children should NEVER play around high water, storm drains, viaducts, or arroyos. It is very easy to be swept away by fast-moving water.
- ✓ If you come upon a flowing stream where water is above your ankles, STOP! Turn around and go another way. Climb to higher ground. If it is moving swiftly, even water 6 inches deep can knock you off your feet. Many people are swept away wading through flood waters, resulting in injury or death.




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**During a Flood Warning,  
Don't Drive  
Whenever Possible!**

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## What You Can Do After the Flood...

- ✓ Get necessary medical care at the nearest hospital. The American Red Cross can provide shelter, food, and first aid, as well as a means to purchase new clothing.
- ✓ Do not visit disaster areas. Your presence might hamper rescue and other emergency operations.
- ✓ If the power is out, use flashlights, not candles.
- ✓ Use flashlights, not lanterns, torches, or matches, to examine buildings. Flammables may be inside.

- ✓ Report broken utility lines to appropriate authorities.
- ✓ Boil drinking water before using. Wells should be pumped out and the water tested for purity before drinking. If in doubt, call your local public health authority.
- ✓ If fresh or canned food has come in contact with flood waters, throw it out.
- ✓ Take steps to reduce your risk of future floods. Make sure to follow local building codes and ordinances when rebuilding, and use flood-resistant materials and techniques to protect yourself and your property from future flood damage.

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**Do not visit disaster areas following a flood. Your presence may hamper urgent emergency response and rescue operations!**

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# Do You Have a Family Disaster Plan?

## I. Gather Information About Hazards

Gather information about hazards. Contact your local National Weather Service office, emergency management office, and American Red Cross chapter. Find out what types of disasters could occur and what you should do. Learn about your community's methods of warning people and evacuation plans. Ask your insurance agent about flood insurance. Find out what you can do to protect your home from the effects of natural hazards that could occur where you live. Meet with your family to create a plan. Discuss the information you have gathered. Pick two places to meet: a spot

outside your home for an emergency such as a fire, and a place away from your neighborhood in case you can't return home. Choose an out-of-town family member or friend as your family check-in contact for everyone to call if the family gets separated, and a backup out-of-neighborhood friend in case the first one does not answer. Discuss what you would do and how to do it if advised to evacuate. Use one vehicle only to avoid getting separated and reduce traffic jams. Decide what measures you will take to make your home less vulnerable to disasters.

## II. Implement Your Plan

1. Post emergency telephone numbers by phones and in address lists each person carries with them. Include cell phone numbers of family and contact-points.
2. Install safety features in your home, such as smoke alarms and fire extinguishers.
3. Inspect your home for potential hazards such as items that can move, fall, break, or catch fire, and correct them.
4. Make physical changes that will make your home less vulnerable; install check-valves and hurricane shutters; strap the hot water heater to wall studs.
5. Have your family learn basic safety skills such as CPR/Automated External Defibrillator (AED) and first aid; how to use a fire extinguisher; and how and when to turn off water, gas, and electricity at the main switches and valves. Know how to operate a NOAA Weather Radio.

6. Teach children how and when to call 9-1-1 or your local Emergency Medical Services number.
7. Keep emergency supplies in your home sufficient for 3 days to a week, if your area has ever lost basic water, electricity and gas service for a week or longer. Assemble a disaster supplies kit with things you will need if you have to evacuate. Store these supplies in sturdy, easy-to-carry containers such as backpacks or duffel bags.
8. Keep important family documents in a waterproof and fire-resistant container.
9. Keep a smaller emergency kit with seasonal supplies, tools, and clothes in the trunk of your car.
10. Each person who has a cell phone should carry it and keep it turned on to receive calls in any emergency situation.

## III. Prepare a Disaster Supplies Kit to Include:

- At least a 3-day water supply (one gallon per person per day)
- Food that won't spoil
- One change of clothing and footwear per person
- One blanket or sleeping bag per person
- First-aid kit
- Prescription medicines
- Emergency tools
- Battery-powered

- NOAA Weather Radio
- Portable radio
- Flashlight with extra batteries
- Extra set of car keys
- Cash and credit card
- Special items for infant, elderly, and disabled family members.

## IV. Practice and Maintain Your Plan

Ask questions to make sure each family member remembers meeting places, telephone and cell phone numbers, and safety rules. Conduct drills. Test smoke alarms monthly and change the batteries at least once a year. Test and recharge fire extinguishers according to manufacturer's instructions and make sure family

members remember how to operate them. Replace emergency food and water supplies once every six months. Contact your local National Weather Service office, American Red Cross chapter or emergency management office for a copy of *Your Family Disaster Plan* (FEMA L-191 or ARC4466).

### Local Sponsorships

