

Patient Information Sheet – Taking care of yourself during an emergency or pandemic

Background

This fact sheet has been developed to provide important information on how patients can best care for themselves during such events. This information is designed to inform patients of the steps they can take before and immediately after an emergency, to optimize their self-care until normal medical services are resumed.

Prepare your medicines, scripts and records in advance

If you have an existing medical condition or routinely take medication, ask your GP in advance for a copy of your health summary, including a list of your current health problems, current medications, allergies and adverse drug reactions.

Keep this information safe together with your prescriptions in your household evacuation kit. If you need medical care during an emergency, this information will make it much easier for a treating doctor (who may not be your usual GP) to provide care. Don't forget to take your regular medicines and 'as required' medicines such as asthma inhalers.

Keep up your regular healthcare

- Continue your usual medication - If you normally take medication, make sure you keep taking it.
- Continue important pathology tests - If you normally have regular pathology tests (e.g. tests to check Warfarin levels or blood glucose levels) you should try your best to continue having these tests where possible.

If it's not important right now, put it off

In an emergency, unless you need immediate medical care, please wait until normal medical services are resumed to see your doctor for non-urgent matters such as routine check-ups or routine pathology tests (e.g. cholesterol levels).

Take special precautions against disease and injury

Call rather than "drop in" unannounced

During an outbreak of pandemic influenza, if you have influenza like symptoms call your general practice for an appointment instead of calling in unannounced. This will assist practice staff in triaging patients and help reduce the risk of cross infection.

The Commonwealth health line (1800 004 566) has up-to-date information regarding outbreaks of pandemic influenza.

Make sure your drinking water is clean

If you suspect water is contaminated, or if the authorities recommend it, you should treat water before drinking it to avoid the risk of gastric infections. Practical information regarding treating water can be obtained from your local health authority.

Wash your hands

To reduce your risk of infection, wash your hands with soap and clean water or disinfectant (e.g. alcohol wipes or hand sanitizer) before handling food and after touching any surfaces or objects that could possibly cause infection such as debris, shopping trolleys, door knobs and hand rails on public transport.

Wear protective clothing

If you are cleaning up debris, wear gloves, durable and protective clothing and covered shoes to avoid injury.

Watch out for wildlife

Animals may be displaced after a disaster. Watch out for potential dangers such as snakes, spiders and other animals. If wildlife has taken shelter in your sheds or home, contact your local council or RSPCA for assistance.

Take care of pets

Many evacuation centres may not accept animals. Therefore, it is important to consider how you plan care for your pets during an emergency. Studies have shown that lack of preparedness in planning for pets can put people at risk in an evacuation. Remember you are responsible for your pets in a disaster.

Contact your local council, state department of primary industries, RSPCA or local vet for information on how to manage animals and pets during an emergency. You may also be able to obtain information from a local evacuation centre during an emergency.

For further information, see:

<http://www.em.gov.au/Documents/Managing%20Animals%20in%20disasters%20text.pdf>

Stay away from power sources

If power lines have fallen, move away slowly and calmly and contact the energy authorities. Be careful around trees, as branches may have become loose and can fall without warning. If you have to step in water to get to the fuse box or circuit breaker, call an electrician first for advice.

Psychological preparedness

While it is important to ensure that you are physically prepared for a disaster, it is equally important to ensure that you are psychologically prepared for an adverse event. Having a good understanding of what to expect during and after a disaster can help to reduce your anxiety levels so that you are able to make better decisions regarding your emergency plan. Being psychologically prepared can also help to reduce the risk of serious injury or death and loss of property and assets.

Further information regarding what you can do to psychologically prepare for a disaster can be accessed from: <http://www.psid.org.au/prepare>

Monitor stress levels

Return to personal and family routines as soon as possible

Maintain a healthy diet, undertake regular exercise and watch your intake of alcohol, caffeine and other stimulants. Get plenty of sleep and rest.

Even very young children can be affected by a disaster. Children benefit from lots of comfort and support from parents who feel cared for themselves in such situations, ideally returning to a normal routine as soon as practical. It is not advisable to allow children to watch repeats of media of the disaster. If you notice behaviour changes or distress in your children you should take them to visit your GP for review.

Get further help

After a disaster, some people may be at an increased risk of developing psychological problems. If you or members of your family are finding it difficult to cope, in the first instance seek advice from your GP. They will refer you to other services as appropriate.

Additional assistance and support can be sought from the following organisations:

- <http://www.lifeline.org.au/>
- <http://www.psid.org.au/public>
- <http://www.headspace.org.au/>
- <http://www.grief.org.au/>

Stay informed

For up-to-date information on emergencies in your state or territory, visit your local emergency service's website:

Victoria	http://www.ses.vic.gov.au/
NSW	http://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/
Queensland	http://www.emergency.qld.gov.au/ses/
Western Australia	http://www.ses-wa.asn.au/
South Australia	http://www.ses.sa.gov.au/site/home.jsp
Northern Territory	http://www.pfes.nt.gov.au/
Australian Capital Territory	http://esa.act.gov.au/