

The First 72 Hours Emergency Pattern Recognition Field Guide

A printable family guide for spotting power outages, water failures, winter storms, wildfire smoke, hurricanes, food shortages, civil unrest, evacuation moments — and more — before waiting becomes the dangerous choice.

History has receipts. Learn the pattern. Protect your family.

This guide is educational preparedness information, not medical, legal, financial, or official emergency advice. Follow local authorities and professional guidance in active emergencies.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is not meant to scare your family. It is meant to make the first few decisions boring, calm, and printable.

1. Print it before you need it

Digital access can fail during outages, storms, evacuations, and overloaded networks. Print one copy and keep it somewhere boring and reachable.

2. Review it when life is calm

The goal is pattern recognition. If you read it before stress hits, you are more likely to notice when a normal day is turning into a decision window.

3. Pick your family triggers

Do not wait for everyone to agree under pressure. Decide ahead of time what makes you leave, shelter, communicate, or stop waiting.

4. Keep it spouse- and kid-safe

No bunker talk. No doom theater. Use calm language: "I want us to have a boring plan before we need one."

The point

The first 72 hours are not just a supply test. They are a recognition test: What is happening? What might fail next? What should we do before waiting becomes expensive?

The First 72 Hours Framework

Use this page before every emergency page. It keeps your family from inventing a plan while conditions are changing.

First 15 minutes

- What changed?
- Who needs help first?
- What still works?
- What source is trustworthy?

First 3 hours

- Is this getting better or worse?
- What system might fail next?
- Do we shelter, move, fill water, charge devices, or call family?

First 12 hours

- What are we assuming?
- What would make waiting dangerous?
- What needs rationing?
- Who has not checked in?

24–72 hours

- What needs backup?
- What must be documented?
- Can we safely stay?
- What is the next calm move?

Rule of thumb: If your plan requires perfect alerts, calm roads, full phone batteries, easy store access, and everyone agreeing later, your plan is already fragile.

Family sentence: “We are not trying to predict everything. We are noticing what is changing early enough to protect each other.”

Power Outage / Blackout

Emergency 1

How to identify it early

- Lights flicker, cell service slows, traffic signals fail, neighbors step outside, utilities give vague restoration windows.
- Weather, heat, cyber issues, equipment failure, or storms are affecting more than one home.

What families usually misread

"It will be back in an hour, so we do not need to change anything."

What may fail next

- Phone batteries
- Refrigerated food
- Heating/cooling
- Medical devices
- Traffic control
- Payment systems

What to do

15 minutes

- Charge every device and battery bank.
- Find flashlights before dark; avoid candles if children/pets are moving around.
- Check on vulnerable household members.

3 hours

- Decide what food must stay closed, be cooked, or be discarded later.
- Set a communication check-in plan.
- If heat/cold is dangerous, identify a backup location now.

12 hours

- Preserve phone power; use texts instead of calls.
- Move frozen items together and keep doors closed.
- Listen for outage scope and safety alerts.

24–72 hours

- Relocate if indoor temperature becomes unsafe.
- Protect medications/medical devices.
- Document losses if needed.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when temperature, medical needs, food safety, or security depends on power returning "soon."

"We are not panicking; we are acting while the house is still easy to manage."

Water Failure / Boil-Water Order

Emergency 2

How to identify it early

- Low pressure, cloudy water, city alerts, nearby main breaks, flooding, unusual taste/smell, or a sudden rush on bottled water.
- Restaurants/schools close or switch to bottled water.

What families usually misread

"The tap is still running, so we probably have time."

What may fail next

- Safe drinking water
- Cooking
- Baby formula
- Pet water
- Handwashing
- Toilet function if pressure stops

What to do

15 minutes

- Fill clean containers, pitchers, bottles, and tubs if water is still running.
- Separate "safe to drink" from "flush/cleaning only."
- Check official boil-water instructions.

3 hours

- Estimate one gallon per person per day minimum, plus pets.
- Stop wasting clean water on nonessential tasks.
- Identify backup sources: stored water, trusted store, neighbor, community distribution.

12 hours

- Boil, filter, or treat water only according to the actual hazard.
- Plan simple meals that use little water.
- Keep hands clean without burning through drinking water.

24–72 hours

- Rotate water use by priority: drinking, medicine, baby needs, pets, hygiene.
- Track what is left each morning and evening.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when pressure drops, shelves empty, or every container in the house is still empty.

"I'm filling water now because it is boring and easy before it becomes stressful."

Winter Storm / Extreme Cold

Emergency 3

How to identify it early

- Forecasts escalate, ice warnings appear, stores run low, schools close, roads glaze, wind increases, or power flickers.
- Officials start warning people not to travel.

What families usually misread

"We have handled cold before; this is just another storm."

What may fail next

- Road access
- Power
- Heat
- Pipes
- Cell service
- Medication access
- Childcare routines

What to do

15 minutes

- Charge devices and gather warm layers in one place.
- Move cars off risky streets if possible.
- Confirm everyone knows where blankets, flashlights, and meds are.

3 hours

- Let family know whether you are staying put.
- Protect pipes according to local guidance.
- Bring pets inside and reduce unnecessary travel.

12 hours

- Create one warm room if heat is limited.
- Keep carbon monoxide safety strict: no grills/generators indoors.
- Check on elderly neighbors/family.

24–72 hours

- Relocate before roads worsen if heat is failing.
- Ration fuel/battery use.
- Document damage and avoid risky thawing shortcuts.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when travel is closing, heat is uncertain, or cold-sensitive people are depending on luck.

"We are making the house boring-safe now so nobody has to improvise on icy roads later."

Hurricane / Flooding / Major Storm

Emergency 4

How to identify it early

- Forecast cone shifts toward you, evacuation zones are discussed, gas lines grow, drainage areas fill, or neighbors begin boarding windows.
- Rain arrives before the main event and roads start changing.

What families usually misread

"The last one turned, so this one probably will too."

What may fail next

- Roads
- Power
- Clean water
- Emergency response speed
- Fuel
- Cell service
- Access to stores

What to do

15 minutes

- Check your evacuation zone and flood risk.
- Take photos of important rooms/documents.
- Move essential papers, meds, and chargers into one grab location.

3 hours

- Decide the leave/stay trigger before emotions rise.
- Fill fuel and water if safe.
- Tell family your plan and backup contact.

12 hours

- Leave early if you are in an evacuation/flood zone.
- If sheltering, move away from windows and low areas.
- Freeze water bottles to help preserve food if power fails.

24–72 hours

- Avoid floodwater and downed lines.
- Do not return just because the sky looks calmer.
- Track boil-water and road notices.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when roads, bridges, fuel, or official evacuation timing are no longer under your control.

"Leaving early is not dramatic; it is how we avoid making family decisions in traffic and floodwater."

Wildfire Smoke / Dangerous Air

Emergency 5

How to identify it early

- The sky turns hazy, smells like smoke/chemicals, air-quality alerts rise, children cough, or visibility drops.
- The danger may arrive even when the fire is far away.

What families usually misread

"If I cannot see flames, this is not an emergency."

What may fail next

- Safe outdoor air
- School/outdoor routines
- HVAC filters
- Lung safety
- Visibility
- Travel comfort

What to do

15 minutes

- Bring everyone indoors and close windows/doors.
- Check AQI or official air alerts.
- Find masks/filters if you already have them.

3 hours

- Create a cleaner-air room if possible.
- Set HVAC to recirculate if appropriate.
- Cancel unnecessary outdoor activity, especially for kids/asthma/elderly.

12 hours

- Monitor symptoms and official guidance.
- Avoid vacuuming/frying/candles that worsen indoor air.
- Plan relocation if indoor air/health is deteriorating.

24–72 hours

- Replace/monitor filters if needed.
- Limit travel through heavy smoke.
- Seek medical advice for breathing trouble.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when symptoms begin, AQI is severe, or you keep treating bad air like bad weather.

"We are treating the air like the emergency because our lungs do not care where the smoke came from."

Food Shortage / Grocery Disruption

Emergency 6

How to identify it early

- Shelves thin out, prices jump, delivery windows disappear, a storm/panic buy starts, or specific staples vanish.
- People buy emotionally and stores stop feeling normal.

What families usually misread

"There is still food in the store, so we do not need a plan."

What may fail next

- Normal meals
- Baby/pet/special-diet foods
- Budget control
- Fuel/time for shopping
- Calm decision-making

What to do

15 minutes

- Inventory what you already have before panic-buying.
- List meals your family will actually eat.
- Check baby, pet, medication, and special-diet needs first.

3 hours

- Buy boring staples only if safe and affordable.
- Avoid "servings" math; think calories, water, and meals.
- Plan simple meals with minimal cooking.

12 hours

- Protect fridge/freezer food if power risk exists.
- Share needs with family/neighbors if appropriate.
- Avoid blowing the budget on fear purchases.

24-72 hours

- Use perishables first if power is uncertain.
- Track meals by day, not by vibes.
- Reassess what is missing before the next store trip.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when special needs, babies, pets, or medical diets are not covered and stores are getting worse.

"We are buying meals our family can actually use, not fear in a bucket."

Civil Unrest / Social Panic

Emergency 7

How to identify it early

- Large crowds form, rumors move faster than facts, police routes change, stores close early, traffic redirects, or local alerts mention curfews.
- The threat may be confusion, crowds, and timing more than direct violence.

What families usually misread

"It is probably somewhere else, so our normal route is fine."

What may fail next

- Road access
- Store access
- Accurate information
- Family routines
- Calm judgment
- Personal security

What to do

15 minutes

- Confirm where household members are.
- Avoid crowds and rumor-driven travel.
- Check official local sources, not only social media.

3 hours

- Change routes before traffic locks in.
- Bring children/young adults home early if needed.
- Pause nonessential errands near tension points.

12 hours

- Keep lights/routines calm at home.
- Document closures/curfews.
- Prepare to stay in without making dramatic public moves.

24–72 hours

- Avoid becoming part of the crowd.
- Keep communication simple.
- Restock only when routes are calm and open.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when your plan requires driving through crowds, rumors, blocked roads, or escalating police activity.

"We are not choosing sides; we are keeping our family away from confusion until the situation settles."

Evacuation Moment: When Home Stops Being Safer

Emergency 8

How to identify it early

- Officials mention voluntary evacuation, roads are still open, air/water/fire/flood risk is worsening, or one adult feels the timing window closing.
- Leaving feels premature, which is exactly why it may still work.

What families usually misread

"We will leave if it gets really bad."

What may fail next

- Roads
- Visibility
- Fuel
- Family agreement
- Pet logistics
- Hotel/friend availability
- Communication

What to do

15 minutes

- Name the trigger: what would make staying unsafe?
- Put shoes, meds, documents, chargers, keys, pets, and kids together.
- Send one check-in text.

3 hours

- Leave before traffic if your trigger is met.
- Travel light: people before property.
- Use a route away from the hazard, not just away from fear.

12 hours

- Do not return because you feel guilty about leaving.
- Update one trusted person.
- Track official reentry/safety notices.

24–72 hours

- Document costs/damage.
- Keep receipts.
- Reset supplies before going home if possible.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when leaving later would require better roads, calmer kids, clearer air, or more agreement than you have now.

"We can feel silly later; right now we are leaving while leaving still works."

Extreme Heat / Grid Strain

Emergency 9

How to identify it early

- Heat advisories stack, nighttime temperatures stay high, power demand warnings appear, AC struggles, or older/kid/pet symptoms show.
- Heat becomes dangerous quietly because the house still looks normal.

What families usually misread

"It is uncomfortable, not dangerous."

What may fail next

- Safe indoor temperature
- Power grid
- Medication stability
- Sleep
- Child/elderly resilience
- Pet safety

What to do

15 minutes

- Hydrate and cool vulnerable people first.
- Close blinds/curtains on sun-facing windows.
- Charge devices while power is available.

3 hours

- Identify cooling centers, libraries, relatives, or public buildings.
- Avoid cooking indoors if it adds heat.
- Check on elderly neighbors/family.

12 hours

- Relocate before heat illness signs escalate.
- Watch for confusion, dizziness, stopped sweating, nausea.
- Keep pets off hot pavement and in cooler rooms.

24–72 hours

- Plan cooling by time of day.
- Preserve medication and food safety.
- Leave if indoor temperature stays unsafe.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when vulnerable people cannot cool down or sleep and you are hoping the house will fix itself.

"Heat is invisible until it is not; we are cooling people before pride gets in the way."

Chemical Spill / Industrial Accident

Emergency 10

How to identify it early

- Sirens, strange odors, smoke plume, sudden road closures, shelter-in-place alerts, burning eyes/throat, or emergency vehicles moving toward an area.
- The confusing part is not knowing whether to leave or seal in.

What families usually misread

"If it were serious, we would already know exactly what to do."

What may fail next

- Safe air
- Road routes
- Official clarity
- School pickup timing
- Normal errands
- Trust in rumors

What to do

15 minutes

- Get indoors or upwind/uphill if instructed and safe.
- Close windows/doors; turn off outside air intake if appropriate.
- Check official emergency channels.

3 hours

- Follow shelter/evacuation orders precisely.
- Do not drive toward the plume or blocked roads.
- Prepare meds, documents, pets, and kids in case instructions change.

12 hours

- Avoid using contaminated water/food if warned.
- Track symptoms.
- Keep communication short and factual.

24–72 hours

- Wait for official all-clear.
- Document exposure/damage.
- Replace filters/clean only according to guidance.

When waiting becomes dangerous: Waiting becomes dangerous when you are using rumors instead of official instructions while air, roads, or symptoms are changing.

"We are not guessing; we are getting out of the air and following the safest confirmed instruction."

Family Decision Triggers

Triggers keep your family from arguing with the clock. Pick simple rules before stress hits.

Decision	Use this trigger	Do not wait for...
Leave	Roads, air, water, fire, flood, heat/cold, or official guidance is moving against you and you still have a safe route.	Everyone to feel brave, certain, or fully packed.
Shelter	Outside is more dangerous than inside and official guidance says to stay put or seal in.	A perfect explanation of the whole event.
Communicate	Phones still work, people are separated, routes may change, or power/internet may fail.	Your battery to be almost dead.
Stop waiting	The same action is getting harder each hour: leaving, filling water, buying basics, checking on family, or cooling/heating the house.	The danger to become undeniable.

Write your family triggers

We leave if: _____

We shelter if: _____

We contact family when: _____

We stop waiting when: _____

Printable Wallet / Contact Cards

Cut these out or copy them onto index cards. Put one in wallets, backpacks, glove boxes, and the family go-folder.

Parent / Adult 1

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Meds: _____ Meeting place:

Parent / Adult 2

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Meds: _____ Meeting place:

Child / Dependent

Name: _____ Allergies: _____

Emergency contact: _____

Out-of-area contact

Name: _____ Phone: _____ If separated, text this person first.

Household meeting points

Near home: _____

Outside neighborhood: _____

Out-of-area contact: _____

Pet plan: _____

Tip: If cell networks are overloaded, text messages may work better than calls. Keep messages short: "Safe. At library. Battery 42%. Next check 7pm."

Calm Spouse-Friendly Script

Preparedness often fails because the conversation sounds bigger, stranger, or scarier than it needs to.

The simple version

"I'm not panicking, I just want us to have a boring plan."

Say this

- "This is for power outages, storms, water problems, and normal disruptions."
- "I do not want to spend a fortune."
- "I want the kids to feel calmer because the adults have a plan."
- "Let's do the first small step, not become survival influencers."

Avoid leading with this

- Collapse predictions
- SHTF language
- Political blame
- Huge shopping lists
- Anything that makes the family feel judged or trapped

Try this tonight: "Can we spend 15 minutes picking our leave/stay/contact triggers? If nothing ever happens, great. If something does, we won't be inventing the plan while stressed."

One-Page Print, Store, Review Checklist

Print

- This guide
- Wallet/contact cards
- Medication and allergy list
- Insurance/contact notes
- Local emergency numbers

Store

- One copy in a boring reachable place
- One copy in the go-folder
- Flashlight + batteries nearby
- Chargers/battery bank
- Basic water plan written down

Review

- Once this week
- Before storm season / winter / heat season
- After moving homes
- When a child, pet, medication, or job schedule changes
- After any real disruption

Practice once

- Find shoes, keys, meds, documents
- Text the out-of-area contact
- Fill water containers
- Leave the house in 15 minutes, even if just as a drill
- Notice what slowed you down

Final rule: The goal is not to be afraid. The goal is to notice the pattern early enough to protect the people you love.

Defeat History