

Are you medically prepared for a natural disaster?

January 11 2011, By Sarah Jorgenson



Imagine having to evacuate your home quickly as 60 mph winds shatter your windows, water crawls under your front door and the electricity cuts leaving your house as dark as the inside of a coffee can. Would you be prepared? Now visualize being one of the 56 million Americans with a disability, such as wheelchair dependence, or one of the 133 million with a chronic disease, such as asthma.

This scenario is a reality for many who have lived through natural disasters, like [Hurricane Katrina](#) or Tropical Storm Fay.

In a new study of more than 37,000 people, lead author Jeffrey Bethel Ph.D., professor for the Department of Public Health at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., and colleagues discovered how many of

us would be prepared.

“We found that overall, regardless of health status, 40 percent of all households had four preparedness items, 29 percent had an evacuation plan and 90 percent had a three-day supply of medications,” Bethel said. “When it comes to those with poor health, [disabilities](#) and [chronic diseases](#), they were less likely to have full household preparedness kits, but more likely to have a three-day supply of medications.”

Household preparedness kits included a three-day supply of water and nonperishable food and a battery-operated working radio and flashlight.

Bethel’s motivation to conduct the study stems from living in Greenville, where Hurricane Floyd attacked in Sept. 1999. “This was an area hit hard by [natural disasters](#), particularly hurricanes. It is also a region with high rates of obesity and various chronic diseases,” Bethel said.

He and his colleagues analyzed data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey from 2006 to 2008 of households in Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, Montana, Nevada and Tennessee.

The study appears early online and in the February 2011 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

“It was encouraging to see 90 percent of households had a three-day supply of medication,” Bethel said. However, the American Red Cross recommends a seven-day supply of medication after a disaster.

Marcie Roth, director of the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), said it is important for people to also have a copy of their prescriptions or information about the specifics of the medication they take, in case they have to evacuate.

She said that each individual must determine what he or she will need in an emergency. When communities are planning for disasters, people with disabilities, “the experts, those who live it on a daily basis, have to be at the table,” said Roth, who has two children with disabilities and has rheumatoid arthritis.

The study has a message for everyone: “We need to be planning for the whole community because everyone can find themselves in a vulnerable circumstance,” Roth said. “The more prepared I am as an individual, the more I can be a resource for family, neighbors or those with or without disabilities.”

More information: Bethel JW, Foreman AN, Burke SC. Disaster preparedness among medically vulnerable populations. *Am J Prev Med* 40(2), 2011.

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