

Japanese tsunami underscores need for elder disaster preparedness

March 18 2011

The oldest segment of Japan's population will likely be the hardest hit as a result of the recent earthquake and subsequent tsunami, based on data from previous catastrophic events. Approximately 23 percent of Japanese citizens currently are age 65 and above.

"Japan's [population](#) — with the highest proportion of older people in any country — gives us an indicator of where the world as a whole is headed," said James Appleby, RPh, MPH, executive director of The Gerontological Society of America. "The significance of this demographic shift and the severity of the tsunami's effects are highlighted by the numerous reports showing that seniors suffer disproportionately during natural disasters."

For example, the May 12, 2008, [earthquake](#) in Wenchuan, China, was associated with a twofold increase in the one-year mortality among a group of nonagenarians that lived nearby, according to a study published in March 2011 issue of *The Journal of Gerontology Series A: Biological and Medical Sciences*.

Similarly, the spring 2006 edition of *Public Policy & Aging Report*, reported that three quarters of those who perished in Hurricane Katrina were over the age of 60.

"Our thoughts are with the people of [Japan](#) as this time. Many people have limited access to food and water, and there is concern that lifesaving medicines could soon be in short supply. A number of the

tragic news stories we see call attention to the needs of older people and other at-risk populations," Appleby said.

There also is a growing field of literature that outlines necessary steps for elder disaster preparedness in the face of an emergency. The Public Policy & Aging Report demonstrated that geographic information systems are able to map patterns of vulnerability in advance, allowing policymakers and first-responders to intervene both effectively and efficiently when disaster strikes.

Additionally, multi-tiered evacuation plans, pre-existing social networks, and "go-kits" can be used to assist elders at critical moments. These kits may include detailed contact information for family members; contact information for relevant health care providers; high-nutrient foods; and a week's supply of all prescription and over-the-counter medications, including a list of medications, the required dosage, and times of administration.

Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

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