

Tornadoes don't have to be deadly, experts say

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Having a 'safe room' nearby, staying alert to warnings key to saving lives, CDC notes.

(HealthDay) -- More "safe rooms" to flee to, listening for weather alerts and better planning, especially for seniors, could reduce the death toll from devastating tornadoes, a new U.S. government report finds.

"People who work or live in tornado-prone areas should develop a tornado safety plan before [severe weather](#) strikes," said Federico Feldstein, a spokesman for the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), which conducted the new study.

The report focused on the aftermath of a deadly cluster of [tornadoes](#) that struck the southeastern United States last year between April 25 and 28, claiming 338 lives -- the third-deadliest tornado disaster in U.S. history.

The CDC researchers found that certain patterns emerged from the wreckage. They noted that 40 percent of bodies were recovered outdoors near the impact area, about half of the fatalities occurred in single-family homes, and those living in mobile homes were at especially high risk.

All of this emphasizes the importance of getting quickly to a "safe room," the CDC authors said, *if* one exists nearby.

According to the report, "federal and state assessments conducted after this disaster found a general inadequacy of available storm shelters in the impacted areas," which included locales in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee -- states long prone to tornadoes.

The CDC defines a safe room as "either an underground shelter, such as the interior part of a basement, or a specific tornado-safe room that is a hardened (e.g., concrete) above-ground structure specifically designed to meet Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) criteria for providing 'near-absolute protection' in extremely powerful [weather events](#)."

Helmets might also be useful, because [head trauma](#) was a leading factor in many of the tornado deaths. While there's no solid evidence that wearing a helmet can protect tornado victims from head trauma, having one close by is advised. However, "choosing to use helmets to protect the head should not be considered an alternative to seeking appropriate shelter," the CDC researchers said.

The CDC team noted that the April 2011 deaths occurred despite the presence of tornado warning systems and intense media attention. Not surprisingly, nighttime tornadoes were deadlier than those in the daytime, but the experts urge people in storm-prone areas to stay "informed of storm watches and warnings" at all times "by using a

weather band radio or other means."

Older people are especially vulnerable, with almost one-third of the dead from last April's storms being age 65 or older. For this reason, "emergency planning for vulnerable older adults is important," the CDC said, and should include items such as plans for finding shelter and properly preparing caregivers.

Agency experts say that because tornadoes can be both unpredictable and deadly, "increased awareness of the need to prepare for the worst-case scenario by pre-identifying and sheltering in an adequate tornado-safe room . . . remain critical to saving lives."

The findings are published in the July 20 issue of the CDC's journal, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

More information: Find out more about "safe rooms" at [FEMA](#).

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