

As hurricane season and pandemic collide, here's how to stay safe

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With forecasts showing an "extremely active" hurricane season and the entire country under varying degrees of grappling with physical distancing and fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, planning and preparation will be key, experts say.

Our hospital systems are already stressed taking care of COVID patients, so our capacity to take care of others is diminished," said Dr. M. Tyson Pillow, the vice chair of education and academic affairs at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration experts predict seven to 11 hurricanes, with three to six of them reaching winds of 111 miles per hour or higher during this year's season, which runs June 1 to Nov. 30.

Pillow said there are at least three groups who may need extra care after a [hurricane](#): people who have COVID-19; those with injuries from a storm; and people with preexisting conditions such as [cardiovascular disease](#).

"There aren't mutually exclusive groups," Pillow said, noting that COVID-19 is associated with inflammation of the heart and that people who already have serious heart conditions such as heart failure or coronary artery disease also are at greater risk for serious illness from COVID-19.

In addition, the stress of dealing with a natural disaster and its aftermath can increase the risk for heart attack and stroke.

For example, a study that looked at New Jersey counties hardest hit by Hurricane Sandy found there were an additional 125 heart attacks and 36 additional strokes in the two weeks after the 2012 storm compared to the same time period from the previous five years. Heart attack-related deaths also increased.

Adding to this burden, fear of catching the virus may make some people hesitant to follow evacuation orders, said Natalie Simpson, an associate professor and chair of operations management and strategy at the University at Buffalo School of Management in New York. That might be especially true for people who would need to use an [emergency shelter](#).

Simpson, an expert in emergency response operations, urged people in a storm path to listen to experts' recommendations.

"There's a hierarchy of safety," she said. "If you're in immediate danger from a hurricane, you need to get out of harm's way."

She suggested making a list of nearby shelters and talking with family and friends who may be able to offer temporary accommodations to ride out a storm or storm season.

"If you're proud of your record braving hurricanes, this might be the one year to leave (because of the pandemic), if you have a safe option," she said. "If

you can extract yourself from the situation, you're decomplicating the problem in a way that helps everybody."

Not only are some hospital systems strained because of COVID-19, but emergency medical services and other first responders may be stretched in communities simultaneously dealing with a hurricane and high coronavirus activity.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends preparing a "go kit" that includes items you would usually need during an emergency—as well as hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, soap, disinfectant wipes and face masks.

People with [health conditions](#) also should order at least a week's supply of any prescribed medications and keep a list of drug names and dosages in a waterproof bag, said Dr. Jill Weatherhead, an assistant professor of infectious disease and tropical medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.

"If you don't know your health information or have it readily available, it's very difficult to obtain appropriate health care needs during a natural disaster like a hurricane," she said.

Even if experts don't call for an evacuation, the CDC recommends keeping these important items on hand:

- Drinking water
- Non-perishable foods such as canned goods
- Matches and flashlights
- Important contact phone numbers

"You should have supplies if you have to stay and shelter in place, but there's been a lot of pressure on the supply chain, so make sure you're only taking what your family really needs," Weatherhead said.

While dealing with a hurricane during a pandemic can be complicated, she said an array of institutions are working together to coordinate care and create a safety net.

"Hurricanes aren't a new phenomenon. We've lived through complex situations related to hurricanes in the past and we have learned that preparation is key," Weatherhead said. "Preparation will be particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to reduce any further health risk associated with COVID. The more prepared you are, the less risk you'll have."

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