



When disaster strikes!

Natural and human-made disasters occur now more frequently than ever. Recently, several high-profile disasters such as

9/11, the 2003 European heat wave, the SARS outbreak, the Indian Ocean tsunami and hurricanes Katrina and Wilma have opened many eyes and minds to potential threats that exist all around the world.

The statistics are staggering: between 1995 and 2004, worldwide disasters killed nearly one million people, affected another 2.5 billion people and caused billions of dollars in damages. Rapid climate changes, global conflicts and the wider spread of diseases may increase the risk of large-scale emergencies in the coming decades.

While many seniors are capable of fending for themselves in an emergency situation, advancing age puts us all at greater risk of

injury or death. Yet when medical services are in high demand and resources are in short supply, older people are the least likely to receive aid. Often, it's the most

vulnerable community members, such as frail older adults and seniors with special needs, who are cared for last. Planning is needed to correct this situation.

But being a senior does not necessarily imply vulnerability. Older people have a wealth of experience

that often translates into valuable coping strategies for the entire community. In preparing emergency plans, seniors need to be considered, consulted and engaged.



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Bhupinder Kaur Dhillon
NACA member





NACA

The National Advisory Council on Aging consists of up to 18 members from all parts of Canada and all walks of life. The members bring to Council a variety of experience and expertise to advise the federal Minister of Health, his colleagues and the public on the situation of seniors and the measures needed to respond to the aging of the Canadian population. Current

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An unpredictable planet

Natural disasters have occurred throughout our planet's history: ice ages, plagues, floods, droughts, forest fires, etc., have tested human resources for millenia and have probably contributed to much of our resourcefulness as a species. But recently, heat waves and cold snaps, heavy rains and prolonged droughts, severe storms of all kinds (hurricanes, tornadoes, ice storms, hail storms, etc.) are becoming more frequent and more powerful because of our rapidly changing global climate. Weather extremes are causing more and more natural disasters all around the world, and Canada is no exception. Epidemics are also more likely to spread quickly because of global travel and commerce.

Coping with disasters requires preparation. People with well thought-out emergency plans respond better to disaster situations than those without. Monitoring global meteorological trends, recognizing your personal strengths and weaknesses and the likely causes of disasters in your area, along with planning and regular emergency drills can make a bad situation much more manageable... it can even save your life.



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Recent natural disasters in Canada

Event, Year	Number of deaths	Number of injuries	Number of evacuations	Damage (in millions of \$)
BC and AB forest fires, 2003	3	N/A	45,000	700
Hurricane Juan, NS, 2003	8	N/A	N/A	113
Northern AB forest fires, 2002	0	0	1,550	22
Pine Lake, AB tornado, 2000	12	140	1,000	30
Drummondville, PQ tornado, 1999	1	4	200	44
Quebec/Ontario ice storm, 1998	28	945	600,000	5,400
Red River, MB flood, 1997	0	0	25,447	817
Saguenay, PQ flood, 1996	10	0	15,825	1,722

Source: Canadian Hurricane Centre, 2004; Filmon, 2004; PSEPC, 2004.



■ Recognizing seniors' vulnerability

It's impossible to paint all seniors with a single brush stroke, but research shows that people over 60 are far more likely to be hurt or killed in a disaster. Several factors can increase vulnerability:

Limited social contact

Studies show that seniors who have few contacts, most often a result of living alone or in rural areas, are the least informed about impending emergencies and are likely to miss community warnings. Once a disaster strikes, reduced mobility, dependence on—caregivers and medications, unfamiliarity with emergency procedures, and even an unwillingness to leave pets or belongings behind can contribute to keeping seniors in their homes when it's safer to evacuate. Following a crisis, seniors may not seek out or accept financial or mental health assistance because of the stigmas associated with such help or because they believe that these services are intended for others with greater needs.¹



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Disabilities

Since disaster situations can be very demanding, any diminished physical ability or sensory perception adds to a person's vulnerability. Mobility impairments, hearing loss, even a diminished sense of taste can place seniors at higher risk during emergencies.

Frailty

The frail elderly, many of which are living with chronic physical or mental conditions, have a greater vulnerability to injury and death during and following a disaster. Dependence on a caregiver or on life support equipment can put seniors at even greater risk during power outages or when roads are closed.

■ Personal preparedness

Before a disaster strikes, there are actions that we can all take to help make a bad situation a little bit better. Here are some proactive tips for people of all ages and abilities.²

Help reduce global warming

Many of the recent weather extremes are due to our consumer habits and excessive use of energy. Each of us can do our share of prevention by reducing, recycling and reusing.

Eliminate hazards from your home

Regardless of the exact nature of the anticipated disaster, it's possible to make your home more disaster-safe. Start by securely anchoring heavy and sharp objects: medical equipment, appliances, bookcases, your water heater, etc. Place heavy objects on low shelves where they will do little damage if knocked off.

1. Ngo, E. B. "When disasters and age collide: Reviewing vulnerability of the elderly," *Natural Hazards Review*. May 2001.

2. Bay Area Emergency Preparedness Coalition. *Basic tips in emergency preparedness for seniors and people with disabilities*. Online: www.preparesnow.org/ba-eprep.html



Know your home and community

Make sure you know where to find important utility devices like your electrical box and gas and water shut-off valves. Plan for the worst by placing a flashlight and spare batteries in these areas. Find out about your community resources – who to call and where to go when a disaster strikes.

Practise your emergency plan

Does everyone in the family know how to react if there's a fire? What about if there's a flood, or a gas leak? Practising your strategies will help everyone to be calmer and to make fewer mistakes. In times of crisis, the less improvising the better.

Make a survival kit

Prepare a well-stocked survival kit that will have adequate food, water and supplies for you and your family (see box). Make sure it's stored in a safe, dry place and update the contents at least once a year.

Other considerations

Always have a 7–14 day supply of your essential medications stored in a safe, dry place and keep a copy of your prescriptions. Keep important equipment and assistive devices in a consistent, convenient and secure place so you can get to them quickly and easily. If you rely on a mobility device (cane, crutches, walker or wheelchair), keep a backup handy if you can. The same goes for hearing aids, batteries, glasses, and any other devices you rely on that could easily be lost or broken. Discuss with your caregiver or personal attendant the best course of action to take in the event of an emergency. Make sure that you also have a personal support network that will check on you in case a caregiver or emergency worker can't get to you. Finally, make up a personal emergency health information card to communicate to rescuers what they need to know about you, in case of an emergency or injury. Include medications, family phone numbers and any special instructions regarding your care and treatment. Post one on your fridge and keep one in your wallet

Emergency survival kit

Drinking water

- At least 2L per person per day

Food

(update food items every 3 months)

- Canned foods
- Crackers/biscuits
- Peanut butter, jam, honey, etc.

Equipment

- Flashlight and batteries
- Radio and batteries or crank radio

- First-aid kit
- Candles and matches/lighters
- Knives, forks, spoons, cups and plates
- Manual can opener, bottle opener
- Fuel stove and fuel (*do not use a barbeque indoors*)
- Extra car keys and cash (*including coins/cards for telephone*)
- Important papers (*identification for everyone, personal documents*)
- Clothing and footwear (*one change of clothes per person*)
- Blankets and sleeping bags (*one blanket or sleeping bag per person*)
- Toilet paper and other personal supplies
- Medication
- Backpack/duffel bag (*in case you have to evacuate*)
- Whistle (*to attract attention*)
- Playing cards, games

Adapted from: "Be prepared, not scared: Emergency preparedness starts with you", Canadian Red Cross and Government of Canada, July 2003.



■ Canada: Preparing to respond

All levels of government in Canada, NGOs, other voluntary and human relief organizations, as well as the private sector help to protect Canadians from threats to health and safety. They cooperate at the various points of the emergency management cycle: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC)

PSEPC was created in 2003 to help keep Canadians safe. This government department coordinates and supports the efforts of federal organizations to ensure national security and safety. It also develops and implements policies for emergency management related to such crises as natural disasters, crime and terrorism. It works with Provinces and Territories to harmonize systems and improve disaster financial assistance, training and public alerting.

The Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response (CEPR)

Under the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), CEPR is Canada's central coordinating point for public health security issues. It develops and maintains national response plans for Health Canada. It monitors outbreaks and global disease events, assesses the risk to Canadians and keeps our public policy in line with current and future threats. CEPR focuses on natural disasters, bioterrorism and public health concerns (Avian flu, SARS, etc.).

National Coordination

In 2001, the Ministers of Health created the **National framework for emergency health management** to address Canada's need for a coordinated, consistent strategy for dealing with emergencies.

The Framework helps local authorities prepare and respond to health emergencies through shared principles, guidelines and procedures. By respecting regional differences and priorities, the Framework is intended to help in the management of emergencies for all of Canada's diverse communities.

Health Canada

Health Canada is the lead federal department responsible for coordinating the response to a nuclear or radiological emergency under the Federal Nuclear Emergency Plan (FNEP). Health Canada partners with the United States to deal with a potential or actual radiological event that could affect both countries or require joint assistance.

Provincial and territorial

Each provincial and territorial government, as well as local governments prepare action plans and resources related to emergency management. Links for each of the provincial/territorial organizations can be found in the Resources section.



Online disaster information

The *Natural Hazards of Canada* Web page provides maps and data revealing the locations, types and magnitudes of significant natural disasters that have affected Canada during a 150-year period.

www.psepc.gc.ca/res/em/nh/index-en.asp

The Canadian Red Cross

The Canadian Red Cross is a well-known NGO that helps people to rebuild their lives following a disaster. It works with governments and other humanitarian organizations to provide people with basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, first aid, emotional support and family reunification. All services are provided to victims free of charge. The Red Cross is a non-profit organization that survives on the generosity of donors and the hard work of volunteers.

The voluntary sector

Voluntary organizations have become integral to emergency response by addressing the needs of their communities from within. These organizations set up feeding and hydration stations when food is in short supply, promote the delivery of health and social services in culturally-appropriate settings when necessary, and empower people and communities into action.³

Worldwide: Room for improvement

Developing countries

In developing countries, government and relief organizations rarely include seniors among their target groups.⁴ According to studies, many older people are excluded from disaster relief aid as well as social and economic support during recovery. Following the South-East Asia Tsunami of 2004, older populations were overlooked during the initial relief efforts, leaving this group excluded from the longer-term recovery and rehabilitation plans. They were also overlooked as resources for their communities.⁵

Following an emergency, older community members often take on the responsibility of caring for sick and injured family members but rarely receive much information, recognition or reward for their work. With more focus placed on appreciating and improving the role of the older adults within these communities through support and education, seniors can be better equipped to fulfil their role and to pass on authoritative wisdom and guidance to younger generations.

Developed countries

Recent disasters in the Western world are teaching us that more focus on seniors is needed at home, too. For example, over half of those who died in the wake of Hurricane

3. Hutton, D., J. Lindsay and J. Simpson. "Extreme weather events: Facing the challenges in health emergency management," *Health policy research bulletin*. Issue 11, November 2005.

4. HelpAge International, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: Guidelines and best practices*. Online: www.helpage.org/resources

5. HelpAge International. "The impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami on older people: Issues and recommendations." (2005). Online: www.helpage.org/Resources/Researchreports#swHC



Katrina were over 50 years of age. The Western European Heat Wave of 2003 resulted in over 35,000 deaths, many of which would have been prevented by proper preparation and awareness.⁶ Following 9/11, there were nearly 19,000 older adults living in the vicinity of ground zero, many of whom were left alone for days while animals were being rescued around them. Even Florida, a state renowned for its senior registry found that it was under-prepared for locating all of the State's seniors following Hurricane Wilma.

An additional area of concern in the developed world is the ability of long-term care facilities to respond to an emergency situation. When disaster strikes, the added strain on the facilities, the patients and the staff can create havoc. Fortunately, facilities are now fine-tuning their emergency plans and holding regularly scheduled training drills in order to be prepared for eventual crises.⁷

■ Seniors: A resource in times of crisis

Seniors are a resilient bunch: no one can live through more than five decades without developing the skills to cope with life's ups and downs. Some researchers believe that these attributes make older adults more likely to prepare properly for a disaster and less likely to become depressed following one.⁸ Indeed, researchers found that after the 1997 Red River flood in Manitoba, seniors coped with the stressors around them more effectively than did younger survivors.⁹

When it comes to preparing for future disasters, the experience and knowledge gained from the past make seniors a very valuable resource. Older adults, especially people living in areas frequently hit by disasters, can apply their past experiences to the development of educational materials programs. For example, a group of seniors from Rochester, NY, has published a preparedness information report, available on the American Red Cross Web site,¹⁰ that is based on their experience in an ice storm that left them without power for two weeks. They recommend to other seniors emergency preparedness measures that would have eliminated many of the hardships they had to endure.



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6. World Health Organization. "Health and climate change: The now and how. A policy action guide." 2005.

7. Gold, M. F. "Emergency preparedness keeps danger at bay". *Provider*. January 2005.

8. Fried, E. E. "The elderly may have advantage in natural disasters," *Psychiatric times*. January 2001.

9. Aging in Manitoba. "Good news from the flood study." May 1999. Online: www.aginginmanitoba.ca/docNews/flood.html

10. www.redcross.org/services/disaster/0,1082,0_9_00.html



During and after an emergency, seniors are also well positioned to identify home-bound adults to authorities, help in the distribution of resources to vulnerable community members and assist with shelter management.

■ Get involved!

Thanks to a wealth of experience and wisdom, seniors are perfectly suited to contributing to emergency planning. Preparedness is underway in communities across Canada. Contact your local officials to learn more about how you can help, and benefit, from the work being done in your area.

■ Sources and Resources

Canadian Red Cross: www.redcross.ca

Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response:

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cepr-cmiu/index.html

Health Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ed-ud/index-e.html

HelpAge International: www.helpage.org

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada: www.psepc-sppcc.gc.ca

Provincial and Territorial Emergency Management Organizations (EMOs)

Alberta: www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/ema_index.htm

British Columbia: www.pep.bc.ca

Manitoba: www.gov.mb.ca/emo/index.html

New Brunswick: www.gnb.ca/cnb/emo-omu/index-e.asp

Newfoundland and Labrador: www.mpa.gov.nl.ca/mpa/emo.html

Northwest Territories: www.maca.gov.nt.ca/safety/emergency_organization.html

Nova Scotia: www.gov.ns.ca/emo/Abspage.aspx?cccccsiteid=1&lang=1&id=1

Nunavut: www.nss.gc.ca/site/whoweare/index_e.asp

Ontario: www.mpss.jus.gov.on.ca/english/pub_security/emo/about_emo.html

Prince Edward Island: www.gov.pe.ca/infopei/index.php3?number=20720&lang=E

Quebec: www.msp.gouv.qc.ca/secivile/index_en.asp

Saskatchewan: www.cps.gov.sk.ca/safety/emergency/default.shtml

Yukon: www.community.gov.yk.ca/emo/index.html



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Dhillon, of Burnaby,

British Columbia, has been

a volunteer on committees and fundraising events for organizations as varied as the Royal Canadian Air Cadets, the Multicultural Society, Adoptive families of Greater Vancouver, the Cancer Society, and the Heart and Stroke Foundation. She is currently a board member of the Burnaby Multicultural Society, where issues of cultural diversity in health care are of great concern. She was appointed to NACA in August 2005 for a three-year term.