

Preparing You for Emergencies: Winter Storms

Winter weather in Kentucky lasts from November through March. If you keep your home heated, listen to the weather forecast and dress appropriately for the temperature, you can appreciate this season. Winter storms are possible throughout this season, prepare now in the event the weather turns bitterly cold, windy and snowy.

Winter weather can be deadly. Extreme cold can cause hypothermia (an extreme lowering of the body's temperature) that can result in death. Fireplaces, emergency heaters, and candles can cause household fires and produce toxic fumes. Carbon monoxide from kerosene heaters and improperly vented furnaces can cause asphyxiation (unconsciousness or death from a lack of oxygen). Hazardous road conditions due to ice and snow can cause car accidents. Emergency services will have longer response times due to road conditions.

Prepare now for winter emergencies

Preparation is the best way to protect yourself from emergencies during the winter weather season. Follow these suggestions to prepare yourself, your home and auto.

Your Home

Consider some capital investments in your home to maintain warmth and keep your utility bills as low as possible. Insulate your walls and attic to prevent heat loss. This will also help you in the summer to keep your house cool by keeping conditioned air inside.

Caulk and weather-strip doors and windows. If your windows are leaky, consider replacing the windows with units that are more energy efficient. If you can't replace your windows, cover windows with plastic from the inside. Insulate any water lines that run along outer walls or in a crawl space or unheated basement. This will make it less likely that you will have frozen water lines.



Have chimney and flue inspected making sure the furnace and fireplace are allowing combustion gases and smoke to leave the house and not allowing the buildup of carbon dioxide.

Your Car

Make sure that your car is serviced before the beginning of winter weather. Check your tires for the right pressure and make sure they have sufficient tread to get you through the season. Verify the car exhaust is in good shape and that there are no leaks allowing the exhaust to get into your auto. Don't leave your car running when the snow is high as exhaust buildup under the car will seep into the passenger department.

Yourself

First and foremost, remember that babies, the elderly and people who are ill are at higher risk from the cold and should be kept warm. Try to keep these individuals indoors. Health issues can be exacerbated by becoming hypothermic.

If you have to go outside in the cold, dress warmly. Wear loose-fitting, layered clothes. The layer of clothes will keep warm air in towards your body and act as insulation from the cold. Outer garments should be tightly woven and water-repellent to prevent the cold air from getting close to your body. Wear mittens rather than gloves—mittens are warmer. If you shovel snow, do stretching exercises to warm up. If you have any medical conditions, especially high blood pressure, heart disease or history of stroke, do not shovel snow at all. If you do decide to shovel, take breaks often. Cover your mouth with a scarf or balaclava to protect your lungs from extremely cold air. Avoid working too hard (strains your heart) and drink water to avoid dehydration.



Whether shoveling snow or enjoying winter outdoor recreation, watch for signs of frostbite. A feeling of “pins and needles” followed by numbness (no feeling) is an indicator of frostbite. Skin may freeze hard and look white and when you thaw it out, the skin is red and painful. Bad frostbite may cause blisters or gangrene (black, dead tissue).

Frostbite is a localized condition, but sometimes the whole body becomes cold, resulting in hypothermia. Signs of hypothermia include uncontrolled shivering, slow speech, memory loss, stumbling, sleepiness and extreme fatigue. If you think you have frostbite or hypothermia, don't eat or drink anything containing caffeine or alcohol as they can worsen your symptoms. Drink warm liquids that do not contain caffeine or alcohol.

For more information visit the American Red Cross web page on winter safety at http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/0,1082,0_595_.00.html.