

Preparing You for Emergencies: Preparing You for Vacation

Emergencies can happen at anytime. Preparing for emergencies before your go on vacation will help should the unthinkable occur while you are trying to enjoy yourself.



Before you travel

Anyone who has ever left for vacation has spent time considering whether or not they will come home to find things the way they left them. Whether you are concerned with a burglary occurring while you are gone or a tornado that damages your home, you should prepare for emergencies before you walk out the door.

Most criminals who burglarize homes are looking for an easy hit; a house that they can break into quickly, take something of value, and leave without being detected. There's no fail-proof way to keep out a burglar, but every little bit of deterrence helps. Even if you can't afford a security system, you can take a few minutes to make your home a little safer. Some relatively simple steps will greatly decrease the odds of a break-in, which means you can enjoy a bit more peace of mind. And isn't that what "home" is all about?

If you were a burglar targeting your own home:

How would you get in to your home? Evaluate your home from the inside and out, night and day. You might even try a "mock" break-in, trying window jambs and loose locks on your house's perimeter. Just let the neighbors know what you're up to before you go lurking in the bushes.

If you failed your test, here are a few thoughts to harden your residence to burglars.

Lights

Even though most burglaries occur during the day, some occur during hours of darkness. Criminals are in search of houses with no one home. To reduce your home's risk of burglary at night, install motion lights in the front and in the rear of your house wherever possible. To be extra cautious, try to position the lights at the corners of your residence so the motion detectors can catch someone approaching from the side. Make sure the lights are positioned at a height that someone cannot disable them by easily reaching up and unscrewing the bulb. Make sure your light bulbs are working before you leave for vacation.

Landscape

Make sure all shrubs and trees are trimmed back so they do not allow a burglar to be concealed while attempting to open a window or door.

Scope out your yard

In general, don't leave anything around the yard that might help a burglar get into your house. Ladders, stackable boxes and all garden tools should be put away, preferably in a locked cabinet. Many burglars have used the property owner's own tools to break into a home. Don't place outdoor furniture tables nearby the house. These could become an easy stepladder to the roof.



Secure the windows

Though windows are relatively easy to break, the loud noise of shattering glass will deter a thief if you're near other houses. Don't leave windows and doors open during the night whether you're home or away. That's a commonsense precaution, but a surprising number of people forget to do just that, especially second story windows. It's a good idea to make a "pane patrol" part of your ritual of leaving the house. Basement windows are an easy target, since they're low and usually well hidden. Firmly wedge a steel bar across the window, or install a metal grate.

Protect your valuables

Don't leave your valuables (stereo, computer, jewelry, etc.) where they can be seen from a window. If you don't want to hide everything from sight, consider draperies and blinds. Make a valuables inventory. Keep a record of your expensive and personally significant items--not just a listing, but a photographic or videotape record if possible. Store this inventory at another location. This is helpful for both the police and the insurance agency (if you have a homeowner's policy) to identify the stolen goods.

Use an engraving pen to mark these items with some kind of personal identifying information, such as your initials, in an inconspicuous place. This also helps record your possessions in case of any other mishap, such as fire or flood.

Mail

Make sure you suspend your mail service while you are gone. Mail stacked up in your mailbox is an indicator that you are out of town.

Prepare your home

Now that you have your home secured, what other steps should you take to protect your home while you travel?

Contact person/Caretaker

A house sitter is one way to ensure that you will have a home to come home to, but when you can't afford a house sitter or can't find a friend to stay in your home, ensure that someone will check on your home daily. This person should also have your cell phone number and the contact numbers for each location where you spend the night (i.e., friend or hotel).

Electricity

Daily, someone should check to see if the electricity has been interrupted. If the power goes out while you are gone, you could come home to a house reeking of what rotted in your refrigerator or freezer. Also, if your lights are on a timer, they may not be coming on at the appropriate time.

Water

Consider turning off your hot water heater while you are gone. A hot water heater that fails will allow water to leak until the water it is turned off. This could result in significant water damage.

Outside

Make sure you have all trash cans and lawn furniture secure. If a storm blows in while you are gone, outside furniture and trash cans could be strewn across the yard, or worse, blown into your home causing damage. Put trash cans and furniture in the garage if possible.

Getting Home

When you arrive home, check the house from the exterior to ensure that nothing is disrupted. If you find any signs of a break in, door or window open, do not enter the house. Call the police and have them enter the house before you do.

September 11

After the September terrorist attacks, national travel was halted by shutting down the airline system. If there were events affecting the gasoline distribution in the United States, the same thing might happen to car travel. Ensure that your house sitter can watch over your home if you are forced to be away longer than expected.

Always keep some cash on hand while you travel. If a national emergency does occur, it may be difficult to get cash. Keep cash on hand so you will have resources if an emergency does occur. Credit cards will be useful, but cash will always be a rare commodity during a national emergency.