

Preparing You for Emergencies: Community Hazardous Material Incidents

When a train derails, a truck wrecks or a plant has an emergency where chemicals are either released or have the potential to be released, community leaders will make a decision whether to instruct the public to shelter-in-place or evacuate.

Shelter-in-Place

One of the instructions you may be given in an emergency where hazardous materials may have been released into the atmosphere is to shelter-in-place. This is a precaution aimed to keep you safe while remaining indoors. Shelter-in-place means selecting a small, interior room, with no windows, and taking refuge there. It does not mean sealing off your entire home or office building.

- Stop normal operations.
- If there are students, or visitors in the building, provide for their safety by asking them to stay – not leave. When authorities provide directions to shelter-in-place, they want everyone to take those steps now, where they are, and not drive or walk outdoors.
- Unless there is an imminent threat, ask employees, students and visitors to call their emergency contact (see last month’s “Preparing for Emergencies”) to let them know where they are and that they are safe.
- Turn on call-forwarding or alternative telephone answering systems or services. If you have voice mail or an automated attendant, change the recording to indicate that the staff, students and visitors are remaining in the building until authorities advise it is safe to leave.
- Close and lock all windows, exterior doors, and any other openings to the outside.
- Select interior room(s) above the ground floor, with the fewest windows or vents. The room(s) should have adequate space for everyone to be able to sit down. Avoid overcrowding by selecting several rooms if necessary. Large storage closets, utility rooms, pantries, copy and conference rooms without exterior windows will work well. Avoid selecting a room with mechanical equipment like ventilation blowers or pipes because this equipment may not be able to be sealed from the outdoors. This room should already be identified in your building’s Emergency Action Plan.
- It is ideal to have a hard-wired telephone in the room(s) you select. Call emergency contacts and have the phone available if you need to report a life-threatening condition. Cellular telephone equipment may be overwhelmed or damaged during an emergency.
- Keep listening to the radio or television until you are told all is safe or you are told to evacuate. Local officials may call for evacuation in specific areas at greatest risk in your community.

Evacuation

In the event that sheltering-in-place is not an option, local community leaders may issue an order to evacuate the area. This will also be communicated through the University's Fast Alert. Follow the instructions provided by the media or University sources.