



What to do if you are caught in an emergency situation abroad, by Megan Johnson

Earlier this summer, a hydrothermal explosion at Yellowstone National Park caused tourists to run to safety. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but it got me thinking about when disaster strikes while you are on vacation. Typically, your vacation will go on without incident, but you never know when something may happen and what you should do. From natural disasters to emergencies, here is what you should do when you are away from home and the unexpected happens.

1. **Prioritize Safety: The first thing you should do is get somewhere safe.**

Follow Evacuation orders: If there is an evacuation order, follow the instructions of local authorities. If you are somewhere, you aren't familiar with the language, get a good translation app and try to find someone who speaks your first language that can help.

Stay informed: Monitor news reports and official emergency alerts for updates. At the start of the situation, you may not have to evacuate, but that could change.

Seek Shelter: Depending on the emergency, finding shelter is likely a key component for your safety. If you can't evacuate, find a safe place to shelter, such as a sturdy building or a designated shelter.

Don't stay to get the footage: In this day and age, with everyone wanting to get the viral social media post, it can be tempting to hang around and take a video of what is happening. Please don't do this for your own safety and that of everyone around you.

2. **Communicate with Loved Ones:** Let others know you are safe: Once you are in a safe location contact family and friends to let them know you are ok.

Have a plan: Before you leave, agree on a designated person or place to contact in an emergency. Choose someone with the contact information of others you want to keep informed of the situation so they can communicate.

3. **Prepare for Disruptions:**

Have a disaster kit: Carry a basic emergency kit with essentials like food, water, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, and a battery-powered radio. This may be harder if you are far from home, but travel-sized options are available, and it can't hurt to throw them in your carry-on. A small battery radio first aid kit and flashlight plus a sweatshirt, portable charger, protein bars and a water bottle.

Be mindful of your surroundings: Pay attention to potential hazards, such as downed power lines or flooding.

Be prepared for power outages: Have a backup power source for your phone and other devices.

4. **Seek Assistance:**

Contact emergency services: If you need immediate help, call emergency services. Be sure to have the local emergency number in your phone before you leave for your trip.

Reach out to local organizations: Many communities have disaster relief organizations that can assist, and these will typically be listed online once disaster strikes.

If Abroad, Contact the US Embassy or Consulate: The embassy will be able to help you figure out an escape plan and may even send assistance if you need it.

5. Plan for your Return:

Check on your home: Once the immediate danger has passed check on your accommodation to assess any damage and see if you need to secure an alternate place to stay. If your accommodation is unavailable, seek shelter elsewhere or consider heading to the airport to get home.

Follow local guidelines: Adhere to any restrictions or guidelines issued by authorities until you can get home. The most important thing is to stay safe and follow the instructions of local authorities.

6. Remain Calm

While it may seem like a no-brainer, remaining calm is essential to your safety and the safety of your family. Panicking may be your first instinct, but we often can't adhere to protocol when we panic. Try to keep a clear head to get yourself out of the situation and to safety, quickly.

In most emergencies, you can follow these steps to ensure your safety. Still, each type of emergency (natural disaster, man-made emergency, or medical emergency) may have additional or different steps you should take.

Natural Disasters – While modern technology has helped us determine the impending arrival of some natural disaster (e.g., if a hurricane is predicted to arrive the day after you land, you may want to consider rebooking your trip), there are still many natural disasters that cannot be predicted, like earthquakes, tsunamis and tornados. These require immediate action to stay safe.

Floods: According to the World Health Organization, floods are the most common natural disaster. According to Ready.gov, if you suddenly find yourself in a flood, evacuate immediately if told to, find shelter immediately, do not swim or walk through the waters, get to the highest level possible and stay where you are.

Earthquakes: Immediately seek shelter, and then follow the above steps.

Hurricanes and typhoons: If a hurricane or typhoon is forecast to be a direct hit, you may consider leaving your destination early (or not going at all if it is forecast before your trip). These storms can bring strong winds, heavy rainfall, and flooding and you could end up stranded.

Tornadoes: Tornadoes can occur suddenly, but meteorologists can typically alert the public when conditions could produce one. Sign up for alerts for the area you are visiting so you are able to take shelter if a tornado should occur. In any thunderstorm, you should seek shelter and for a tornado, get to the lowest floor possible indoors, by an internal wall with no windows.

Volcanic eruptions: If you are going somewhere near an active volcano, prepare yourself for a potential eruption. Be aware of areas for shelter and pack long sleeves, face mask, and goggles for protection from ash and gases.

Wildfires: If you vacation somewhere and a wildfire breaks out, obey all evacuation orders.

Tsunamis: These giant waves can be caused by earthquakes or volcanic eruptions and areas will typically have a warning ahead of time. Get to higher ground as soon as any warning is made. If there is no warning, try to reach higher ground as fast as possible and stay away from windows and other objects that could break. Make a plan with your family for a meeting spot after the Tsunami if you get separated.

Man-made Disasters and Emergencies - Several emergencies can arise due to people causing them – like protests, attacks, or explosions. Most man-made disasters require following the steps mentioned before, but others require additional steps and advice.

Civil unrest: If there is a sudden, unexpected bout of civil unrest where you are visiting, the steps mentioned above still pertain: find somewhere safe and adhere to any curfews or road closures. Avoid confrontations with protestors or law enforcement and get inside as soon as possible. If it seems like it is going to escalate and is not a one-time thing, make plans to leave as soon as possible.

Terrorist attacks: Staying safe is your priority, if you find yourself in the middle of an attack, protect yourself. Get back to your accommodations as quickly as possible and follow the emergency procedures.

Medical Emergencies - According to Allianz Travel, the most common medical emergencies while traveling are fractures from falls, cardiovascular problems, trauma and pulmonary/respiratory problems. Illness, injuries, or accidents can require immediate medical attention, and do not hesitate to seek care. Head to the nearest hospital, or in a more serious situation, call an ambulance.

Medical Emergencies While Abroad – There are a few things that differ when you have an emergency while abroad.

Travel health insurance: If you are abroad, contact your travel insurance company to see if any of your care is covered – as well as your health insurance provider. Please note: Medicare and Medicaid will not cover any health care costs abroad, so purchasing travel medical insurance is important, especially if you have an underlying condition. I was once in an ATV accident while in Canada, went to the ER to get looked at and despite having no injuries, was left with a hefty bill. My health insurance covered some of it but not all and the process to get reimbursed was a lengthy one. If I had travel health insurance, the process would have been a lot easier and cheaper.

Contact the local embassy or consulate: They can provide assistance, information, and potentially find you English speaking doctors to ease the situation.

Get medical evacuation insurance: If you have an underlying condition and are concerned about something happening, before you leave for vacation, purchase Medical Evacuation insurance, which can help you get back home with medical care.

Be Prepared: Again, if you have an underlying condition, you should also be sure to learn basic medical terms in the language of the country you are visiting and carry a card with basic information in the language about your medical condition and any medications you are taking.