

# Emergency Preparedness Guide for People with Disabilities / Special Needs

## Introduction

Emergencies can occur suddenly and without any advance warning. Although Ontario has effective emergency management legislation and programs, individuals and families play a vital role in preparing for times of crisis when emergency services and other government resources may be strained. It is important that individuals and families prepare to be self-reliant for at least three (3) days immediately after or during an emergency. This guide provides special emergency preparedness considerations and advice for the estimated 1.5 million Ontarians with disabilities and/or special needs, including seniors with special needs.

## Prepare Now

Emergency preparedness includes developing and practising a family emergency response plan and the preparation of an emergency survival kit. For those living with a physical, visual, auditory and/or other non-visible disability, emergency preparedness should also involve incorporating special accommodations into their family emergency response plan. To best prepare for an emergency according to one's special needs, please refer to the appropriate category in this guide for a list of suggested emergency survival kit items and contingency planning considerations. For more information on emergency management arrangements in your area contact your municipal Emergency Management Coordinator through your local government office.

### Emergency Survival Kit Checklist

This Emergency Survival Kit checklist outlines the basic items every individual should keep in an easy-to reach place to help them be self-reliant for at least three (3) days immediately after or during an emergency. Since emergency supply requirements vary for individuals with different disabilities, please refer to the appropriate category in this guide for additional suggested survival kit items.

- Flashlight and batteries
- Radio and batteries or crank radio
- Spare batteries (for radio, flashlight, assistive devices, etc.)
- First-aid kit
- Telephone that can work during a power disruption
- Candles and matches/lighter

- Extra car keys and cash
- Important papers (identification)
- Non-perishable food and bottled water
- Manual can opener
- Clothing and footwear
- Blankets or sleeping bags
- Toilet paper and other personal item
- Medication MedicAlert® bracelet or identification
- Backpack/duffle bag
- Whistle (to attract attention, if needed)
- Playing cards

### Service Animal Emergency Kit Checklist

This Service Animal Emergency Kit checklist outlines the basic items every person with a service animal should have prepared in advance to keep their service animals

comfortable during the stress of an emergency situation. It is advisable to keep all items in a transportable bag that is easy to access should evacuating the home become necessary. Also, remember to check the kit twice a year (an easy way to remember is to do it when you check your smoke alarms bi-annually) to ensure freshness of food, water and medication, and to restock any supplies you may have “borrowed” from the kit.

- Minimum 3 day supply of bottled water and pet food
- Portable water and food bowls
- Paper towels and can opener
- Medications with a list identifying reason (e.g., medical condition), dosage, frequency and contact information of prescribing veterinarian
- Medical records including vaccinations  
Leash/harness
- Muzzle (if required)
- Blanket and favourite toy
- Plastic bags
- Up to date ID tag with your phone number and the name/phone number of your veterinarian (microchipping is also recommended)
- Current photo of your service animal in case they get lost or separated from you
- Copy of licence (if required)

### **Pet Owners**

While service animals are accepted at shelters in an emergency, family pets are not. Hence, it is advisable for pet owners to prepare a similar emergency kit for each family pet according to the needs of each different animal (e.g., cat, rabbit, bird, etc.).

In the case of cats, include a cat carrier, little pan, litter, scooper and plastic bags. It is also recommended for pet owners to have prior arrangements made with family or friends to take care of their animal, should evacuating the home be necessary during an emergency. For additional information on pets and emergencies, please visit the Emergency Management Ontario website at [www.ontario.ca/emo](http://www.ontario.ca/emo).

### **Important Considerations**

#### **Remember...**

- The emergency survival kit items listed in this guide are only a suggestion and may or may not apply to every emergency situation and/or a person’s special needs. Therefore, you should decide which essential items to include for yourself and your family members.
- During an emergency you may have no electrical power.
- During an emergency you may need to go to an emergency evacuation shelter. It is recommended that you and your family have a designated contact person that resides outside of your immediate community. This way, in the event of an evacuation, family members can easily notify each other by calling their designated contact person.
- Pack and store all emergency survival items (including medications, medical supplies and/or assistive devices) in an easy-to-access and easy-to-transport container should you need to evacuate.
- Select a network of individuals at work and at home that will be able to assist you during an emergency. (Make sure you inform your network of where you keep your emergency survival kit.)

- Prepare a list of any food or drug allergies you might have and all the medications you are taking. You may want to provide this list to your designated network and also keep a copy in your emergency survival kit, on your person, at home, your workplace and in your car (if applicable).
- On your list of medications, specify the reason for each medicine that you are taking (e.g., medical condition being treated) including the generic name, dosage, frequency, and the name and contact information of the prescribing physician.
- If you have children with a disability or special needs, prepare a similar list for each of your children and provide it to their caregiver, school, emergency contact members, etc.
- If you have an allergy, chronic medical condition, or special medical need you may want to consider owning and wearing a MedicAlert® bracelet or identification as part of your emergency preparedness plan. For more information visit: [www.medicalert.ca](http://www.medicalert.ca).
- Regularly check expiration dates on all medications, bottled water, and canned/packaged food in your emergency survival kit. It is best to replace food and bottled water at least once a year.
- Prepare a contact information list of all your emergency contact persons and provide a copy to your designated network at work and/or home. Also keep a copy in your survival kit, on your person, at home, at your workplace and in your car (if applicable).
- Provide written instructions for your network on how best to assist you and your service animal (if applicable) during an emergency.
- Label all of your special needs equipment and attach laminated instruction cards on how to use, retrieve and/or move each assistive device during an emergency.
- Since your medications, assistive devices, etc. may change over time, it is advisable for you to regularly assess your needs and incorporate any changes to your emergency survival kit supplies and your family emergency plan.
- If your personal needs require regular attendant care and/or life sustaining apparatus, arrange with your network to check on you immediately if an emergency occurs or if local officials issue an evacuation order.
- Carry a personal alarm that emits a loud noise to draw attention to your whereabouts.
- If you rely on any life sustaining equipment/apparatus, develop an emergency back-up plan that will ensure the equipment/apparatus works in the event of a power outage.
- Install working smoke alarms on every floor of your home and outside all sleeping areas.
- Test smoke alarms on a monthly basis by pushing the test button. Replace smoke alarm batteries every six months and whenever the low-battery warning sounds.
- Develop and practise a home fire escape plan or refer to your building's fire safety plan so that everyone in your home knows what to do in the event of a fire.

- Practise your emergency plan with your network at least twice a year.
- If during an emergency your support network cannot assist you for whatever reason, ask other individuals around you to help you. Remember to inform them of your special needs and how they can best offer any assistance to you.

### **Tips on Helping a Person with a Disability**

- “Ask First” if the person needs or wants your help – do not just assume that they do.
- Allow the person to identify how best to assist them.
- Do not touch the person, their service animal and/or their assistive device/equipment without their permission.
- Follow instructions posted on special needs equipment and/or assistive device during an emergency.
- Avoid attempts to lift, support or assist in moving someone unless you are familiar with safe techniques.
- Never administer any food or liquids to an unconscious or unresponsive person.
- Be aware that some people who have disabilities may request that you use latex-free gloves to reduce spread of viral infection to them.
- Ask the person with special needs if areas of their body have reduced sensation and if they need you to check those areas for injuries after a disaster.

### **Mobility**

Mobility limitations may make it difficult for a person to use stairs or to move quickly over long distances. These can include reliance on mobility devices such as a

wheelchair, scooter, walker, crutches or a walking cane. In addition, people with a heart condition or various respiratory difficulties can experience certain levels of mobility limitations.

### **Your Emergency Plan:**

- Ask your network to practise moving your special needs equipment during your emergency practice plan.
- This will help your network become more comfortable handling or using your special needs equipment during an emergency.
- If you use a wheelchair or scooter, request that an emergency evacuation chair be stored near a stairwell on the same floor that you work or live on, so that your network can readily use it to help you safely evacuate the building.
- In your instruction list for your network, identify areas of your body that have reduced sensation so these areas can be checked for injuries after an emergency, if you cannot check them yourself.
- Check with your local municipal office to find out if emergency evacuation shelters in your area are wheelchair accessible.

### **Dos & Don'ts**

#### **Assisting People with Disabilities**

- Use latex-free gloves when providing personal care whenever possible. (People with spinal cord injury have a greater risk of developing an infectious disease during an emergency. Gloves help control secondary medical conditions that can easily arise if personal care is disrupted during an emergency.)
- Ensure that the person's wheelchair goes with the person.

- Do not push or pull a person’s wheelchair without their permission.

### **Vision**

Vision loss can include a broad range of conditions ranging from complete blindness to partial or low vision that cannot be corrected with lenses or surgery. A person’s ability to read signs or move through unfamiliar environments during an emergency may be challenged, creating a feeling of being lost and/or being dependent on others for guidance.

#### **Your Emergency Plan:**

- Have a long cane available to readily manoeuvre around debris on the floor or furniture that may have shifted after an emergency.
- Mark all emergency supplies in advance with fluorescent tape, large print or in braille. • Mark gas, water and electric shutoff valves in advance with fluorescent tape, large print or in braille.
- Familiarize yourself in advance with all escape routes and locations of emergency doors/exits on each floor of any building where you work, live and/or visit.

### **Dos Don’ts**

#### **Assisting People with Disabilities**

- Always ask first if you can be of any assistance to them.
- For people who are deaf- and/or blind, use your finger to draw an “X” on their back to let them know you are there to help during an emergency.
- To communicate with a deaf- and/or blind person, try tracing letters with your finger on the palm of their hand.

- To guide the person, offer them your arm instead of taking theirs and walk at their pace. Keep half a step ahead of them.
- If the person has a service dog, ask them where you should walk to avoid distracting the animal.
- Provide advance warning of upcoming stairs, curbs, major obstacles, or changes in direction.
- Watch for overhangs or protrusions the person could walk into.
- Do not assume the person cannot see you, or that they need your help. Never grab or touch a person with vision loss.
- Do not touch, make eye contact or distract the person’s service dog as this can seriously endanger the owner. Do not shout at a person with vision loss. Speak clearly and provide specific and precise directions.
- Avoid the term “over there”. Instead, describe locating positions such as, “to your right/left/straight ahead/ behind you”, or by relaying clock face positions. (For example: 12 o’clock)

### **Additional Items**

#### **Hearing**

A person can be deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. The distinction between these terms is based on the individual’s language and means of communicating rather than the degree of hearing loss. In an emergency, the method in which emergency warnings are issued becomes critical to how a person with hearing loss is able to respond and follow instructions to safety.

### **Your Emergency Plan:**

- If your network is unavailable during an emergency, seek the assistance of others to whom you can communicate your hearing loss by spoken language, moving your lips without making a sound, pointing to your ear, using a gesture, or if applicable, pointing to your hearing aid.
- Keep a pencil and paper handy for written communication.
- Obtain a pager that is connected to an emergency paging system at your workplace and/or the building that you live in.
- Install a smoke-detection system that includes smoke alarms and accessory flashing strobe lights or vibrators to gain your attention if the alarms sound.
- Test smoke alarms on a monthly basis by pushing the test button.
- Replace batteries in battery-operated smoke alarms every six months and whenever the low-battery warning sounds.
- Keep a laminated card on your person and in your survival kit that identifies you as deaf or hard of hearing and explains how to communicate with you.

### **Dos & Don'ts**

#### **Assisting People with Disabilities**

- Get the person's attention via a visual cue or a gentle touch on their arm before speaking to them.
- Face the person and make eye contact when speaking to them as they may rely on speech reading.
- Communicate in close proximity.
- Speak clearly and naturally.

- Use gestures to help explain the meaning of what you are trying to communicate to the person. Write a message if there is time and keep a pencil and paper handy.
- Avoid approaching the person from behind.
- Refrain from shouting or speaking unnaturally slowly.
- Do not make loud noises as hearing aids amplify sounds and can create a physical shock to the user.

Note: Typically people who are deafened or hard of hearing will need information presented in a text format.

#### **Non-Visible Disabilities**

Non-visible disabilities can include communication, cognitive, sensory, mental health, learning or intellectual disabilities in which an individual's ability to respond to an emergency is restricted. They can also range from allergies, epilepsy, haemophilia, diabetes, thyroid condition, multiple sclerosis, pulmonary or heart disease and/or dependency on dialysis, sanitary or urinary supplies. Individuals with non-visible disabilities may have difficulty performing some tasks without appearing to have a disability.

### **Your Emergency Plan:**

- Prepare an easy-to-understand list of instructions or information for yourself that you think you may need in an emergency.
- Keep an emergency contact list on your person of key people that are aware of your special needs.
- Inform your designated support network of where you store your medication.
- Keep a pencil and paper or portable electronic recording device handy to write down or record any new

instructions provided to you in an emergency.

- Consider owning and wearing a MedicAlert® bracelet or identification because it will help notify emergency responders about your non-visible disabilities. For more information visit: [www.medicalert.ca](http://www.medicalert.ca).
- Request a panic push-button to be installed in the building you work and/or live in, so that in the event of an emergency you can notify others of your whereabouts and that you need special assistance.
- **People with Multiple Sclerosis:** Symptoms are often made worse by heat and humidity. Be prepared to keep cool and dry.
- **People with Diabetes:** Keep frozen water bottles or ice packs in your freezer. Have an insulated bag or cooled thermos ready to store your insulin, should there be a power outage or you need to evacuate.

## **Dos & Don'ts**

### **Assisting People with Disabilities**

- Allow the person to describe what help they need from you.
- Find effective means of communication (e.g., provide drawn or written instructions. When giving directions use landmarks instead of terms “go left” or “turn right”).
- Be patient, flexible and maintain eye contact when speaking to the person.
- Repeat instructions (if needed).
- Ask the person about their medication and if they need any help taking it. (Never offer medicines not prescribed by their physician.)

- Keep people with multiple sclerosis cool and dry to avoid making their symptoms worse.
- Avoid shouting or speaking quickly. Instead, speak clearly but not so slowly as to offend the person.
- Do not restrain a person having a convulsion. Instead, roll them on their side to keep their airway clear and place something soft (e.g., your jacket) under their head to protect it from injury. Once the convulsion passes and they become conscious, help them into a resting position unique to your special needs.

### **For Example: People with Diabetes**

- Extra supply of insulin or oral agent.
- Extra supply of syringes, needles and insulin pens (if used).
- Small container for storing used syringes/needles (if applicable).
- Blood glucose testing kit, spare batteries and record book.
- Supply of blood glucose and urine ketone testing strips.
- Fast-acting insulin for high blood glucose (if applicable).
- Fast-acting sugar for low blood glucose.
- Extra food to cover delayed meals.
- Ice packs and thermal bag to store insulin (if applicable).

### **Seniors with Special Needs**

Since an emergency situation or an evacuation can be a frightening and confusing time, it is important that seniors, especially those with special needs, know the steps to take in an emergency. This includes seniors contacting their local municipal office to find out about programs

and services available in their community that will help them during an emergency and assist them to return to their regular routine.

### **Your Emergency Plan:**

- Create an emergency contact list with names and telephone numbers of your physicians, case worker, contact for your seniors group, neighbours, building superintendent, etc. Keep a copy of this list in your survival kit and on your person.
- Write down the names and phone numbers of on-site doctors, nurses, social workers, etc., at your place of residence (if applicable), including the hours they keep.
- Familiarize yourself with all escape routes and location of emergency doors/exits in your home.
- Know the location of emergency buttons. (Many seniors' buildings have emergency buttons located in bedrooms and washrooms that have a direct link to 911 or the building's superintendent.)
- If asked to evacuate, bring with you any equipment or assistive devices you may need immediately.
- Always wear your MedicAlert® identification.

### **Dos & Don'ts**

#### **Assisting People with Disabilities**

Check on neighbours who are seniors with special needs to find out if they need your help during an emergency or evacuation. Allow the person to describe what help they need and how it can be provided to them. Be patient, listen actively. If the person appears anxious or agitated, speak calmly and provide assurance that you are there to

help. If evacuation is necessary, offer a ride to seniors who do not have access to a vehicle. If time permits, offer to carry the person's emergency survival kit to your car, along with any equipment or assistive devices they will need. Follow instructions posted on special needs equipment and/or assistive devices during an emergency.

- Refrain from shouting or speaking unnaturally slowly.
- Avoid being dismissive of the person's concerns or requests.

#### **Additional Items Emergency Survival Kit**

- Supply of food items appropriate to your disability or dietary restrictions.
- Assistive devices needed such as canes, walkers, lightweight manual wheelchair, hearing aids, breathing apparatus, blood glucose monitoring device, etc. Prescription eyewear and footwear (if required).
- Extra supply of medications and vitamin supplements.
- Personal disability related list of all your needed medical supplies and special equipment.
- Copies of all medication prescriptions.
- Extra dentures (if required) and cleaner
- Latex-free gloves (to give to anyone providing personal care to you).
- Any other contingency supplies unique to your special needs.
- **For Seniors with Diabetes:** Please refer to previous "Other Non-Visible Disabilities" category.



## High Rise Safety

High-rise buildings present unique challenges when evacuation is necessary during an emergency.

### Residents should make themselves aware of:

- Building superintendent's name and phone number.
- Who sits on the Building Safety Committee.
- Who the floor monitors are.
- Who conducts evacuation drills, and how often.
- Location of fire extinguishers, automated external defibrillator units, and oxygen tank.
- Location of emergency evacuation device(s).

### Your Emergency Plan:

- Advise your building manager/superintendent of your special needs and/or requirements during an emergency.
- Familiarize yourself with your building's evacuation plan.
- Know where all escape routes and location of emergency doors/exits are on each floor.
- Know the location of emergency buttons in the building and exits that are wheelchair-accessible (if applicable).
- Request that an emergency evacuation chair be installed on the floor you live or work on, preferably close to the stairwell (if applicable).
- If you live in a high rise building, create a 'buddy' system with your neighbours and

regularly practise your emergency response plan with them.

- If you rely on any life sustaining equipment/ apparatus, develop an emergency back-up plan that will ensure the equipment/ apparatus is operable in the event of a power outage.
- Obtain large printed signs from the building manager that you can place in your window in the event of an emergency, indicating that you need assistance.

## Dos & Don'ts

### Assisting People with Disabilities

- Check on neighbours and/or co-workers with special needs to find out if they need your help during an emergency or evacuation.
- Listen actively to what the individual with special needs is saying.
- During an emergency evacuation (if time permits), offer to carry the person's emergency survival kit for them along with any special equipment or assistive devices they will need.
- Review previous categories in this guide on how to assist people with specific disabilities and/or special needs.
- In general, avoid attempts to lift, support or assist in moving a person down the stairs, unless you are familiar with safe techniques.

### Travel Considerations

Whether travelling locally or internationally, people with disabilities and seniors with special needs should take extra time to research and plan their trip to make their travel experience safe and enjoyable. This includes preparing in advance, an

emergency plan and “Ready-Go-Bag” with emergency survival items.

### Your Emergency Plan:

- Before travelling, visit the Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada website at [www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca) where you can register and find other helpful travel information safety tips.
- Discuss your particular accommodation needs with your travel agent.
- Discuss your trip with your doctor to prepare contingency plans in case of illness.
- Obtain necessary travel medical insurance.
- Carry a copy of the booklet **Bon Voyage, But...**, that contains contact information for your destination's Canadian office and Emergency Operations Centre. You can order it free of charge at [www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca).
- Divide your medications and medical supplies between your carry-on and check-in baggage, keeping them in their original labelled containers. Bring copies of your prescriptions with you.
- Always wear your MedicAlert® bracelet.
- Inform your travel companion(s) on how to assist you in an emergency.
- If travelling alone, establish a network (e.g., hotel staff) that can assist you during an emergency.
- If you have difficulty using stairs request a room on a lower floor.
- Review the hotel emergency exit plan.
- If needing to evacuate, bring your emergency “Ready-Go-Bag” and any assistive devices you may need.

## Dos & Don'ts

### Assisting People with Disabilities

- Check on fellow travellers with visible disabilities or special needs to find out if they need your help during an emergency or evacuation.
- Listen actively to what the individual with special needs is saying and how they might need your help.
- If they speak in a foreign language that you do not understand, try to communicate using gestures.
- During an emergency evacuation (if time permits), offer to carry the person's emergency survival kit for them along with any special equipment or assistive devices they will need.
- Review previous categories in this guide on how to assist people with specific disabilities or special needs.
- Do not let the person be separated from their wheelchair or mobility aids