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How to get ready for a tsunami

Unfortunately, not all impending natural disasters are prefaced with warnings and safety tips from local officials. Some come suddenly and with shocking force, which means that preparing to stay safe ahead of time is critical. One such disaster is the tsunami.



What's a tsunami?



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A tsunami (pronounced with a silent “t”) is an enormous wave caused by an underwater event, such as an earthquake, erupting volcano or landslide. In the open water, a tsunami can travel at incredibly fast speeds, eventually crashing into land and creating waves that can reach as high as 100 feet.

A tsunami can happen along most of the coastlines in the United States. If an earthquake or other underwater event happens close to shore, a tsunami can reach land in a matter of minutes before safety officials have time to act. That's why preparing ahead of time and learning how to stay safe in a tsunami's aftermath are key.

Preparing for a tsunami

First, find out if your community is in a tsunami hazard area. If so, learn about nearby shelters, warnings and official evacuation routes. If you are in an at-risk area and an earthquake occurs, turn on the radio to see if there is a warning and seek higher inland ground.

When picking an evacuation route, make sure it brings you to an area at least 100 feet above sea level or up to two miles inland and away from the coast. Also, be prepared to evacuate on foot if necessary. Many people also vacation in areas that are at risk for tsunamis, so if you are visiting an island or coastal area, familiarize yourself with evacuation routes and warnings beforehand.

Like all disasters that might force you to leave quickly, don't forget to practice your evacuation route, which improves your chances of staying safe. Also, contact local emergency officials to let them know if you or someone in your household will need help evacuating.



Photo courtesy iStockphoto—Jerry McElroy

Put together an evacuation kit ahead of time that you can take with you at a moment's notice. Make sure your home-based emergency stockpiles are stored in a high place, such as the attic, in case of flooding.

A good piece of equipment to have in a tsunami hazard area is a special portable weather radio that can pick up signals from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Weather Radio All-Hazards network, which broadcasts National Weather Service updates 24 hours a day. Such a device can help keep you connected to the latest safety updates regardless of your location.

If a tsunami comes with little warning, don't waste time trying to save possessions — get yourself and your loved ones to safety as quickly as possible. It's important to heed warnings immediately. Don't stay behind to gauge the threat or wait it out, as it could mean the difference between life and death.

If a tsunami occurs far enough away, officials may have time to activate tsunami warning systems. Familiarize yourself with these warnings so you know how to respond:

- An advisory means an earthquake has happened that might cause a tsunami.
- A watch means a tsunami may have been created, but it is at least two hours away from land. At this point, local safety officials should begin preparing for possible evacuation.
- A warning means a tsunami is expected, along with dangerous conditions. Residents are advised to evacuate.

After a tsunami

In the aftermath of a tsunami, stay away from impacted areas until officials say it's safe to return. Once you do return, take steps to protect your health and safety:

- Wear protective gear, such as rubber boots, goggles and gloves, while cleaning up.
- Flooding may have contaminated drinking water supplies, so listen to recommendations from local officials on how to sanitize the water you use for drinking, cooking and hygiene.
- Do not eat foods that have been contaminated with flood waters. While some foods such as canned items may still be safe, remember: When in doubt, throw it out.
- Stagnant flood waters can serve as breeding grounds for mosquitoes and other disease-carrying insects. Protect yourself with appropriate clothing and insect repellent.
- And don't forget the easiest way to keep yourself disease-free after a disaster: Wash your hands frequently using clean water or hand sanitizer.



Photo courtesy—Erin Sommers



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