

Module 2: Home Safety



As a Caregiver, it is especially important to assure that your home environment is safe for the Veteran and yourself. Although home accidents and falls can cause serious injuries, these can be prevented by checking your home for safety hazards and making some simple changes.

Slips, Trips and Falls

Falls in the home can cause head injuries and other injuries such as broken bones, bruises and burns. Veterans who have injuries or disabilities affecting their balance and ability to walk are especially at risk for slips, trips and falls.

Both slips and trips result from losing solid contact between the feet and the ground. You can minimize these by:

- ★ Making sure you and the Veteran wear shoes that fit properly and are securely tied or fastened.
- ★ Clearing walkways and paths of objects and obstacles.
- ★ Checking surfaces on outdoor pathways making sure they are flat, preferably concrete, packed dirt or asphalt.
- ★ Putting non-skid strips or mats on steps or other slippery surfaces such as the bathtub or shower.
- ★ Cleaning up all spills immediately.



Carrying groceries or other items can also cause trips so remember to:

- ★ Walk slowly and carefully.
- ★ Try not to carry too many items, particularly stacked boxes.
- ★ Keep one hand free when going up or down stairs.

Fear of Falling

When Veterans have an injury or illness that weakens their legs, affects their balance or their ability to walk, they can develop a fear of falling. Although a fear of falling is a natural reaction it can actually result in increasing his/her risk of falling.

A fear of falling may cause the Veteran to avoid walking and to limit other physical activities; as a result his/her muscles become weaker. This sets up a cycle of further imbalance and slower reaction times, resulting in slips and trips.



So you can see why it is important that the Veteran remain as physically active as possible in activities recommended by his/her Primary Care Team.



What to Do In an Emergency

If the Veteran is at risk for falling, it is important to be able to call for help if it is needed. Carrying a cell phone at all times, keeping emergency phone numbers in large print beside every phone and using a medical alert system can help the Veteran get help quickly in an emergency. Ask your Primary Care Team about how to access a medical alert system.



In addition to minimizing slips, trips and falls, it's helpful to take other safety precautions in your home. You can use the following home safety checklist to check the safety of your home and make necessary changes.

A Safe Home is No Accident: A Checklist

Check for the Basics throughout Your Home

Yes No

- Do you have emergency numbers next to the phone?
- Is there a stepladder handy?
- Are electrical outlets exposed? They can be covered if unused.
- Are extension cords frayed? Replace them.
- Do you check electrical outlets to be sure they're not overloaded?
- Do you know where the circuit breaker or fuse box is? Do you have spares?
- Do you know how to turn off the electricity and gas in an emergency?
- Is your hot water heater set at 120° F or below?
- Do you have fresh batteries in the smoke detector and the carbon monoxide detector?
- Is your fire extinguisher ready to use?
- Are your floors non-skid?
- Are your floor coverings and rugs secure?
- Do you have protective screens in front of fireplaces?
- Are candles kept away from walls and curtains?
- Do interior doors have safety release locks so they can open from either side?
- If there are small children in your home, are windows and screens secure?
- Is lead-free paint used on all surfaces?
- Are furnaces and flues regularly inspected and cleaned?
- Are guns unloaded and locked up?
- Does everyone know two ways to exit your home?



Check Your Stairs and Hallways

Yes No

- Are stairways free of clutter and throw rugs?
- Are banisters and railings strong and secured?
- Are all steps the same height and width?
- Are stairways free of toys, tools and other objects?
- Are stair treads and/or carpeting kept in good condition?
- Is the stairwell well-lighted with light switches at the top and bottom?
- Are young children protected by gates at the top and bottom of stairs?
- Are there nightlights in hallways and near stairs?

Know What's Cooking in Your Kitchen

Yes No

- Are window curtains pulled away from your stove?
- Are electrical appliances unplugged when not in use?
- Do gas appliances have flue ventilation?
- Is there a light over the sink and the stove?
- Are freezers and trash compactors locked to protect children?
- Do you keep kitchen drawers and cupboards closed?
- Are knives and sharp tools stored in a rack or drawer?
- Do cooking pot handles point away from the stove's edge?
- Are cleaning supplies stored out of children's reach?
- Do you have pot or dish holders near the stove?



Ensure You've Checked Your Bedrooms

Yes No

- Is a light within easy reach of the bed?
- Are room heaters placed away from furniture and turned off at bedtime?
- Are rooms with freestanding heaters kept well-ventilated?
- Is your baby's mattress firm and crib free of pillows and loose blankets?
- Are infant's and toddler's toys soft, with individual parts too large to be swallowed?
- Are pins and detachable decorations removed from small children's clothes?
- Are plastic dry cleaner's bags destroyed or kept out of children's reach?
- Does everyone know that there is no smoking in bedrooms?
- Are candles kept away from windows and curtains?
- Are closets kept clean enough for doors to open safely?

Clean Up Any Bathroom Hazards

Yes No

- Do tubs and showers have non-skid surfaces or mats?
- Have grab bars been securely installed alongside the bathtub, shower and toilet – especially if someone is elderly or disabled?
- Are all electrical appliances kept away from water and unplugged after use?
- Are all medicines (including vitamins) kept in locked cabinets—out of children's reach?
- Do you separate medicines for external use only from other medicines?
- Do you throw away outdated prescription medications?
- Are infants and young children always supervised when bathing?
- Can the bathroom door be unlocked from inside and out?



Evaluate Your Yard for Potential Hazards

Yes No

- Are your steps and sidewalks clear, and free from toys, tools, ice and snow?
- Is your yard free from glass, nails, yard tools and any other sharp items?
- Do you check play equipment and lawn furniture for safe use?
- Are clotheslines strung high—so no one will walk into them?
- Does the person using the power mower wear sturdy shoes?
- Are children kept away from power tools when they're in use?
- Are gas and charcoal grills kept clean and lit carefully?

Periodically do a safety check of your home to identify items that need attention or as a reminder of safety behaviors you need to follow.



Ask for Help

Ask family members and friends to help you with the checklist and in making your home safe for you and the Veteran.

Who can you ask to help?

The VA is also here to help. The Veteran may be eligible for home modifications such as lowering countertops, expanding doorways, or creating a roll-in shower.



A member of the VA Healthcare Team will be visiting you and the Veteran at home as part of the application for the Caregiver Support Program. Ask them if there are any assistive devices or home modifications that would improve the safety and independence of the Veteran and ease the physical stress of care giving.



What questions do you want to ask the clinician?



Emergency Preparedness

Protecting yourself and your family when disaster strikes, requires planning ahead. Every household should have an emergency plan and needed supplies in the event of simple emergencies such as loss of electricity due to storms, significant natural disasters (such as wildfires) or man made disasters (oil spills, terrorist attack). A disaster may require sheltering-in-place at home or evacuating to an emergency shelter or other form of temporary housing.



For Caregivers and the Veteran with a disability, the challenge of emergency preparedness is more complex and requires detailed advanced planning. Consider all the strategies, services, devices, tools, and techniques that the Veteran and you use on a daily basis. Examples include medications, durable medical equipment, consumable medical supplies, a service animal, assistive technology etc. Think about what you might do if any of these were limited or not available.

The essentials of Emergency Preparedness include:

- ★ creating a personal support network (Discussed in Module 1)
- ★ completing a personal assessment of what you can do for yourself and what assistance you may need
- ★ making a plan
- ★ assembling a disaster supplies kit

Shelter-In-Place

One of the instructions you may be given in an emergency where severe weather conditions, such as a tornado warning, occur is to shelter-in-place. This is a precaution aimed to keep you safe while remaining indoors. (This is not the same thing as going to a shelter in case of a storm.) Shelter-in-place means selecting a small, interior room, with no or few windows, and taking refuge there. It does not mean sealing off your entire home or office building.

*Plan to be able to shelter-in-place
at home for 3-5 days.*

Should this occur, information will be provided by local authorities on television and radio stations on how to protect you and your loved ones. Because information will most likely be provided on television and radio, it is important to keep a TV or radio on, even during the workday. In the event you lose electricity, your disaster kit should include a battery powered or hand cranked radio. The important thing is for you to follow instructions of local authorities and know what to do if they advise you to shelter-in-place.

Remaining at Home

In some situations, such as a severe snow storm, or storm damage with many trees down, you may not be able to leave your home for several days. Many of the same concepts discussed in “Shelter-In-Place,” also apply in these disasters.

If the Veteran is dependent on medical equipment run by electricity, contact your Primary Care Team to discuss an electric generator or other ways to ensure that you will be able to use the equipment when your home does not have electricity. It is also important to contact your local utility company so that you will have priority to have power restored.

How to Shelter-in-Place at Home:

- Get your family disaster supplies kit out and ready to use.
- If the weather remains unstable, you may be told to go to an interior room without windows, below ground level if possible.
- It is ideal to have a hard-wired (land line) telephone in your home in situations where you may lose electricity. Call your emergency contact 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 your 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.



Complete a Personal Assessment

Decide what you will be able to do for you and the Veteran and what assistance you may need before, during and after a disaster. Make a list of the Veteran's personal needs and what resources are available to you to manage in a disaster environment.

Daily Living

Yes No

- Do you need assistance with Personal Care of the Veteran such as grooming and bathing?
- Does the Veteran use adaptive equipment for bathing, such as a shower chair, and/or dressing himself/herself?
- Does the Veteran use special utensils to prepare or eat food independently?
- Do you have a backup for electrical equipment such as electrical lifts?
- Do you have a supply of water if service is cut off or you are unable to heat water?

Getting Around

Yes No

- Do you need a specially equipped vehicle or accessible transportation?
- Do you need help to get groceries, medications, and medical supplies?
- Do you have a planned exit route following a disaster?
- Do you have a plan to cope with debris in your home or along your exit route?
- Will you be able to reach the Veteran if roads are blocked or the disaster has affected the Veteran's home?

Evacuating

Yes No

- Does the Veteran need help to leave the home?
- Have you identified the best exits in the Veteran's home to use in an emergency?
- Is there an in home alarm that the Veteran can access?
- Do you have a plan if you are not able to locate mobility aids such as wheelchairs? Or if ramps shake loose from the house?
- If the Veteran has a service animal, do you have a plan on how to evacuate, and care for the animal?



Community Emergency Agencies

Contact the local emergency management offices to learn about the community response plan, evacuation plan, and designated emergency shelters in the Veteran's community. Ask about special assistance programs in the event of an emergency. Many communities ask people with disabilities to register with the local fire department or local emergency management office to rapidly locate those needing assistance in a disaster. If the Veteran has a secondary Caregiver, let him/her know that the Veteran is registered, and with whom.

Make a Plan

The American Red Cross recommends following these four preparedness steps.

1. Get information
2. Make a plan
3. Assemble a kit
4. Maintain your plan and kit

Step 1: Get Information

Learn what types of threats or hazards are prevalent in your area and contact local agencies to find out about your community's emergency response plans, warning systems, and assistance programs.

Step 2: Make a Plan

Meet with your support network and discuss what you learned about your community's emergency response plans, as well as your own personal assessment of the type of assistance and support you may need.

Create a communication plan and identify an out of town contact who could act as "communication central" in the event you need to execute your emergency plan.

Test your plan against various hazards or disaster scenarios. Ask yourself, "What if?" then discuss alternative actions to take for each type of scenario using the planning worksheet on the next page.



Planning Worksheet

Type of Hazard / Threat: _____

Discuss what to do before the threat if there is sufficient warning to prepare.

What if...	Then do...

Discuss what to do during the threat to protect you, the Veteran and pets.

What if...	Then do...

Discuss what to do after the threat to get help for you, the Veteran and pets.

What if...	Then do...



Step 3: Assemble a Kit

Have disaster supplies ready and be prepared to leave at a moment's notice with all the supplies you may need in a portable container near the exit door.

Also consider having an emergency supply kit in each car and at work.



Recommended Items to Include in a Basic Emergency Supply Kit:

- ★ Water, one gallon of water per person per day for at least three days, for drinking and sanitation
- ★ Food, at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food
- ★ Battery-powered or hand crank radio and a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert and extra batteries for both
- ★ Flashlight and extra batteries
- ★ First aid kit
- ★ Whistle to signal for help
- ★ Dust mask, to help filter contaminated air and plastic sheeting and duct tape to shelter-in-place
- ★ Moist towelettes, garbage bags and plastic ties for personal sanitation
- ★ Wrench or pliers to turn off utilities
- ★ Can opener for food (if kit contains canned food)
- ★ Local maps
- ★ Cell phone with chargers, inverter or solar charger
- ★ Medications the Veteran is taking
- ★ Emergency Cash

Step 4: Maintain Your Plan and Kit

At least once a year review and update your plan with new information, contacts, or action items. Also take an inventory of the items in your emergency kit and replace or replenish it as needed.

For more in-depth information, get a copy of "Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities" from the American Red Cross, or visit:

<http://www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/Preparing/A4497.pdf>

Resources & References

- ★ Family Caregiver Alliance "Where to Find My Important Papers" Available at: <http://www.Caregiver.org>. Click Caregiving Info & Advice , click Hot Topics and scroll to "Where to Find My Important Papers"
- ★ VA Caregiver Support website at <http://www.caregiver.va.gov>
- ★ VA Caregiver Support Line at 1.855.260.3274



