

Tornado Safety

Tornadoes are nature's most violent storms. Spawned from powerful thunderstorms, tornadoes can cause fatalities and devastate a neighborhood in seconds.

A tornado appears as a rotating, funnel-shaped cloud that extends from a thunderstorm to the ground with whirling winds that can reach 300 miles per hour. Damage paths can be in excess of one mile wide and 50 miles long. Every state is at some risk from this hazard. Some tornadoes are clearly visible, while rain or nearby low-hanging clouds obscure others.

Occasionally, tornadoes develop so rapidly that little, if any, advance warning is possible. Before a tornado hits, the wind may die down and the air may become very still. A cloud of debris can mark the location of a tornado even if a funnel is not visible. Tornadoes generally occur near the trailing edge of a thunderstorm. It is not uncommon to see clear, sunlit skies behind a tornado.

Before a Tornado

- To begin preparing, you should build an [emergency kit](#) and make a family communications plan.
- Listen to NOAA Weather Radio or to commercial radio or television newscasts for the latest information. In any emergency, always listen to the instructions given by local emergency management officials.
- Be alert to changing weather conditions. Look for approaching storms.
- Look for the following danger signs:
 - Dark, often greenish sky
 - Large hail
 - A large, dark, low-lying cloud (particularly if rotating)
 - Loud roar, similar to a freight train
 - If you see approaching storms or any of the danger signs, take cover immediately

Tornado Quick Facts

Quick facts you should know about tornadoes:

- They may strike quickly, with little or no warning.
- They may appear nearly transparent until dust and debris are picked up or a cloud forms in the funnel.
- The average tornado moves Southwest to Northeast, but tornadoes have been known to move in any direction.
- The average forward speed of a tornado is 30 mph, but may vary from stationary to 70 mph.
- Tornadoes can accompany tropical storms and hurricanes as they move onto land.
- Waterspouts are tornadoes that form over water.

- Tornadoes are most frequently reported east of the Rocky Mountains during spring and summer months.
- Peak tornado season in the southern states is March through May; in the northern states, it is late spring through early summer.
- Tornadoes are most likely to occur between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m., but can occur at any time.

Watch vs. Warning

Familiarize yourself with these terms to help identify a tornado hazard:

- **Tornado Watch** - Tornadoes are possible. Remain alert for approaching storms. Watch the sky and stay tuned to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio or television for information.
- **Tornado Warning** - A tornado has been sighted or indicated by weather radar. Take shelter immediately.

During a Tornado

If you are under a tornado warning, seek shelter immediately! Most injuries associated with high winds are from flying debris, so remember to protect your head.

If you are in:	
A structure (e.g. residence, small building, school, nursing home, hospital, factory, shopping center, high-rise building)	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go to a pre-designated area such as a safe room, basement, storm cellar, or the lowest building level. If there is no basement, go to the center of a small interior room on the lowest level (closet, interior hallway) away from corners, windows, doors, and outside walls. Put as many walls as possible between you and the outside. • Get under a sturdy table and use your arms to protect your head and neck. • In a high-rise building, go to a small interior room or hallway on the lowest floor possible. • Put on sturdy shoes. • Do not open windows.
A manufactured home or office	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get out immediately and go to a pre-identified location such as the lowest floor of a sturdy, nearby building or a storm shelter. Mobile homes, even if tied down, offer little protection from tornadoes.

The outside with no shelter

If you are not in a sturdy building, there is no single research-based recommendation for what last-resort action to take because many factors can affect your decision. Possible actions include:

- Immediately get into a vehicle, buckle your seat belt and try to drive to the closest sturdy shelter. If your vehicle is hit by flying debris while you are driving, pull over and park.
- Take cover in a stationary vehicle. Put the seat belt on and cover your head with your arms and a blanket, coat or other cushion if possible.
- Lie in an area noticeably lower than the level of the roadway and cover your head with your arms and a blanket, coat or other cushion if possible.

In all situations:

- Do not get under an overpass or bridge. You are safer in a low, flat location.
- Never try to outrun a tornado in urban or congested areas in a car or truck. Instead, leave the vehicle immediately for safe shelter.
- Watch out for flying debris. Flying debris from tornadoes causes most fatalities and injuries.

After a Tornado

- Listen to local officials for updates and instructions.
- Check-in with family and friends by texting or using social media.
- Watch out for debris and downed power lines.
- If you are trapped, do not move about or kick up dust. Tap on a pipe or wall or use a whistle, if you have one, so that rescuers can locate you.
- Stay out of damaged buildings and homes until local authorities indicate it is safe.
- Photograph the damage to your property in order to assist in filing an insurance claim.

- Do what you can to prevent further damage to your property, (e.g., putting a tarp on a damaged roof), as insurance may not cover additional damage that occurs after the storm.
- If your home is without power, use flashlights or battery-powered lanterns rather than candles to prevent accidental fires.

Resources

If you require more information about any of these topics, the following resources may be helpful.

- [*Tornado Protection - Selecting Refuge Areas in Buildings*](#). FEMA 431. Intended primarily to help building administrators, architects and engineers select the best available refuge areas in existing schools.
- [*How to Guides to Protect Your Property or Business from High Winds*](#).

Related Websites

Find additional information on how to plan and prepare for a tornado and learn about available resources by visiting the following websites:

- [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#)
- [NOAA Watch](#)
- [American Red Cross](#)

Listen to Local Officials

Learn about the emergency plans that have been established in your area by your [state and local government](#). In any emergency, always listen to the instructions given by local emergency management officials.