

EARTHQUAKES

FAMILY EMERGENCY PLAN

Protect immediately. Expect aftershocks. Re-enter carefully.

PURPOSE

This plan is written for households that may experience earthquake shaking, falling objects, structural damage, fire, utility failure, road disruption, landslides, or tsunami risk. It establishes immediate protective actions during shaking and a disciplined family process for accountability, evacuation, and safe recovery afterward.

THE FAMILY PRIORITY ORDER

- 1 IMMEDIATE PHYSICAL PROTECTION**
- 2 ACCOUNTABILITY AFTER SHAKING**
- 3 FIRE AND UTILITY SAFETY**
- 4 MEDICAL NEEDS AND COMMUNICATIONS**
- 5 SAFE RELOCATION WHEN REQUIRED**

ReadyParent Preparedness Series | Earthquakes Edition

Source-informed by FEMA / Ready.gov, U.S. Geological Survey, Great ShakeOut, CDC, and American Red Cross guidance.

OPERATING PRINCIPLE

Earthquakes do not give families time to organize once shaking begins.

During shaking, protect your body first. Drop, Cover, and Hold On is the default protective action for most people in most situations. After shaking stops, transition immediately to injury assessment, fire/utility awareness, aftershock protection, and accountability.

What earthquakes can do to a household

Earthquakes can injure through collapsing structures, falling glass, furniture, masonry, ceiling materials, broken utilities, fire, and debris. Roads and bridges may be damaged, elevators may stop, cellular networks may overload, and aftershocks can further damage weakened structures.

Before the hazard develops

The family should complete the following actions before conditions deteriorate or an incident begins.

PART ONE

HOW TO PREPARE

Reduce what can fall, break, or block escape

- Anchor tall furniture, water heaters, shelving, televisions, and other heavy objects according to appropriate building and manufacturer guidance.
- Keep heavy and breakable objects on lower shelves. Do not place heavy wall art, mirrors, or unsecured shelving over beds and common seating areas.
- Know how to shut off water, electricity, and gas if local utilities recommend household shutoff and an actual hazard requires it. Do not shut off gas simply because an earthquake occurred.
- Store sturdy shoes and a flashlight where they can be reached from beds. Broken glass is a common post-earthquake hazard.
- Identify safe cover locations in each frequently occupied room and practice Drop, Cover, and Hold On with children.

Plan for separation and transportation

- Choose an out-of-area contact and two family meeting locations. Expect local voice calls to fail or congest; text messages may work when calls do not.
- Know school, childcare, workplace, and care-facility earthquake procedures. Do not assume children will be released immediately after a major event.
- Keep vehicle fuel above half when practical and maintain walking shoes, water, medications, and a basic get-home kit in regularly used vehicles.

EARTHQUAKE FAMILY RULE

During shaking, do not run outside, stand in a doorway, or attempt to move through falling debris. Protect yourself where you are unless the immediate location has a specific hazard that makes staying impossible.

PART TWO

STAY SAFE DURING

The first seconds are protective action. Family reunification, utility checks, and evacuation decisions happen only after the strong shaking stops.

If you are indoors

- Drop to hands and knees before the shaking knocks you down. Cover your head and neck and, if a sturdy table or desk is nearby, get underneath it. Hold on until shaking stops.
- Stay away from windows, exterior walls, tall furniture, fireplaces, and objects that can fall. Do not use elevators.
- If in bed, stay there and protect your head and neck with a pillow unless a nearby hazard makes the bed unsafe.

If you are outdoors or driving

- Move to an open area away from buildings, glass, signs, trees, utility lines, and other falling hazards, then stay low and protect your head.
- If driving, pull over in a safe location away from overpasses, bridges, utility lines, trees, and buildings. Set the parking brake and remain in the vehicle until shaking stops.
- Afterward, avoid damaged bridges, ramps, tunnels, and roads until authorities confirm they are usable.

Immediately after shaking stops

1. Expect aftershocks. Be ready to Drop, Cover, and Hold On again.
2. Check household members for serious bleeding, breathing problems, entrapment, and other urgent injuries. Call 911 for life-threatening emergencies when service is available.
3. Look and smell for fire, gas leaks, sparking wires, damaged electrical service, broken water lines, and structural instability without entering obviously unsafe areas.
4. Put on sturdy shoes. Move away from visibly damaged buildings and exterior walls where masonry, glass, or facades may fall.
5. Use text messages and the out-of-area contact for accountability. Avoid unnecessary calls that burden damaged networks.

COASTAL EARTHQUAKE RULE

If you are in a tsunami hazard area and feel strong or long earthquake shaking, follow local tsunami guidance and move inland or to higher ground immediately after the shaking stops. Do not wait for an official warning if natural warning signs are present.

PART THREE

AFTER THE DISASTER

A damaged area can remain dangerous for hours or days. Aftershocks, fire, leaking utilities, unstable masonry, damaged roads, contaminated water, and falling debris can create more injuries after the main earthquake than families expect.

Treat the home as a potentially damaged structure

- Do not enter a building with obvious structural damage, shifting walls, major foundation failure, severe roof damage, or orders restricting entry.
- If you smell gas or hear hissing, move away and contact the utility or fire department from a safe location. Avoid switches, flames, engines, or other ignition sources.
- Stay clear of downed power lines and damaged utility equipment. Report hazards to the appropriate utility or emergency service.
- Open cabinets carefully; contents may have shifted and can fall.

Manage sanitation, water, and food carefully

- Follow local water advisories. Damage to water or sewer systems can make normal household use unsafe.
- Discard food contaminated by broken glass, chemicals, floodwater, or unsafe refrigeration. When in doubt, follow public-health guidance.
- Use generators only outdoors and far from doors, windows, and vents to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning.

Reset for aftershocks and recovery

Keep shoes, flashlights, medications, phones, and go-bags accessible. Sleep in areas away from visibly damaged chimneys, heavy objects, or unstable walls. Document damage before cleanup when safe, and use qualified professionals for structural, electrical, gas, and plumbing concerns.

AFTER-ACTION QUESTION

What caused delay, confusion, separation, loss of information, unnecessary exposure, or a preventable failure of supplies? Correct that weakness while the event is still fresh in the family's memory.

FAMILY EARTHQUAKES READINESS STANDARD

The plan is ready when the family can answer these questions without guessing.

✓	Where is the safest Drop, Cover, and Hold On location in each main room?
✓	Which heavy objects in our home are still unsecured?
✓	Where are sturdy shoes and flashlights stored at night?
✓	Who is our out-of-area accountability contact?
✓	What will each person do if separated at school, work, or while driving?
✓	Do we live, work, or travel in a tsunami hazard area?
✓	Who knows how to recognize gas, electrical, structural, and water hazards after shaking?

PRACTICE STANDARD

Practice Drop, Cover, and Hold On at least twice each year and immediately after moving furniture or changing sleeping arrangements. Once a year, walk through the first 10 minutes after a simulated earthquake: injuries, shoes, utilities, accountability, exit, and aftershock readiness.

REFERENCE BASIS

AUTHORITATIVE SOURCES USED FOR THIS PLAN

This ReadyParent plan consolidates widely accepted U.S. preparedness, response, safety, and recovery guidance specific to earthquakes. Local instructions and incident-specific guidance take priority.

Ready.gov — Earthquakes — <https://www.ready.gov/earthquakes>

Earthquake preparation, protective action, aftershocks, utilities, and recovery.

U.S. Geological Survey — Earthquake Hazards Program — <https://earthquake.usgs.gov/>

Earthquake science, monitoring, preparedness, and Drop, Cover, and Hold On guidance.

USGS — What Should I Do During an Earthquake? — <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-should-i-do-during-earthquake>

Immediate protective actions for common earthquake situations.

Great ShakeOut — <https://www.shakeout.org/>

Household earthquake drills and Drop, Cover, and Hold On practice.

American Red Cross — Earthquake Safety — <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/earthquake.html>

Preparedness, response, and recovery guidance.

Publication note

Guidance reviewed August 2026. This document is educational preparedness guidance and does not replace instructions from local emergency management, law enforcement, fire/EMS, public-health authorities, utilities, building officials, event security, or other agencies with jurisdiction. Conditions vary by location and incident; when official instructions conflict with this plan, follow the official instructions.