

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

A Practical Guide to Emergency Decision-Making

“Should I Stay or Should I Go?
“If I go, there will be trouble
“And if I stay it will be double.”
— The Clash, 1982 ¹⁾

This guide helps you make one of the most critical decisions in any emergency: whether to **shelter in place** or **evacuate**. This decision must be correctly — and making it *early* — can save your life and the lives of those around you.

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The Core Decision

The stay-or-go decision is rarely made in a calm, well-lit room with plenty of time. More often, it happens under stress, with incomplete information, possibly at night, and with dependents relying on you. This is why **the decision must be planned in advance**, not improvised in the moment. ²⁾



The Golden Rule of Emergency Decision-Making: A plan made today, even an imperfect one, is worth more than a perfect plan made under duress tomorrow. Prepare your decision criteria now, before you need them.

The two options are:

Option	Definition	Core Risk
Shelter in Place	Remain in your home or current location, using it as a protective barrier	Being trapped, cut off, or overwhelmed if the threat reaches or surrounds you
Evacuate	Leave the area entirely, moving to a pre-determined safer location	Being caught in the open, on clogged roads, or unprepared away from home

Neither option is universally correct. The right choice depends on **the nature of the threat, your location, your resources, and your personal circumstances.**

Types of Emergencies

Different emergencies have different default postures. Understanding the type of emergency is the first step in your decision.

Weather Emergencies

Emergency	Default Posture	Notes
Hurricane / Typhoon	Evacuate (if in flood zone or Zone A/B)	Storm surge is the leading killer; distance from coast matters enormously ³⁾
Tornado	Shelter in Place	No time to evacuate; go to lowest interior room immediately
Blizzard / Ice Storm	Shelter in Place	Roads become impassable; home is safer than car
Wildfire	Evacuate early	The single greatest mistake is waiting too long ⁴⁾
Flash Flood	Evacuate immediately	Never shelter in a flood-prone structure; never drive through floodwater
Earthquake	Shelter in Place (during), assess after	Drop/Cover/Hold On during; then assess structural damage
Extreme Heat	Shelter in Place (with cooling) or go to cooling center	Power outage changes this calculus dramatically

Social Unrest / Civil Emergency

Social unrest, civil disturbance, or breakdown of civil order presents a more complex decision matrix because the threat is mobile and unpredictable. ⁵⁾



In cases of civil unrest, your **home's defendability, your neighborhood's vulnerability, and your ability to remain inconspicuous** are all relevant factors. A quiet rural home and a ground-floor urban apartment present very different risk profiles.

- **Stay** if: Your home is secure, you have supplies, the unrest is localized elsewhere, travel routes are dangerous
- **Go** if: Unrest is in your immediate area, authorities order evacuation, your home is not defensible, you have a secure destination

Other Emergencies

Emergency	Default Posture	Key Factor
Chemical / Hazmat spill	Shelter in Place or Evacuate	Depends entirely on wind direction and distance ⁶⁾
Pandemic / Disease outbreak	Shelter in Place	Minimize contact; follow public health guidance
Power grid failure	Shelter in Place (short-term) / Evacuate (extended, extreme temps)	Duration and season are decisive
Nuclear / Radiological event	Shelter in Place initially	Get inside, stay inside, stay tuned — the “3 Ss” ⁷⁾
Home or Building fire	Evacuate immediately Grab bags and out	No exceptions — never re-enter a burning structure. You likely have no control of how a fire starts (a neighbor) or how it is controlled

The Decision Framework

Use this structured framework to evaluate your situation. Think of it as a **mental checklist** to work through when an emergency develops.

Step 1: Identify the Threat

Ask yourself:

- What type of emergency is this?
- Where is it now, and where is it moving?
- How fast is it developing?
- What is the official guidance from authorities?



Time is your most critical variable. A slow-developing storm gives you hours to decide. A flash flood or fast-moving wildfire may give you minutes. Always err toward acting *earlier* than feels necessary.

Step 2: Assess Your Home's Suitability

Ask yourself:

- Is my home structurally sound?
- Is it in a flood zone, fire interface zone, or storm surge area?
- Does it have a safe interior room (for tornadoes)?
- Can it be sealed against air contamination (for chemical events)?
- Do I have adequate supplies to shelter for the expected duration?

Step 3: Assess Your Evacuation Viability

Ask yourself:

- Do I have a vehicle with fuel?
- Are roads open and passable?
- Do I have a destination?
- Can all members of my household travel?
- Can I leave within the next 30 minutes if needed?

Step 4: Weigh the Relative Risks



Avoid the “it won't happen to me” bias. Research consistently shows that people underestimate threats to their own home and overestimate their ability to manage an emergency in place.⁸⁾ When in doubt, follow official evacuation orders — they exist for a reason.

Build a simple comparison:

Factor	Stay Score (1-5)	Go Score (1-5)
Home is in the threat's direct path	Low	High
Official evacuation order issued	Low	High
Roads are open	Neutral	High
Have a safe destination	Neutral	High
Household has mobility limitations	High	Low
Supplies available at home	High	Low
Threat is fast-moving	Low	High

Tally informally. The direction of the score guides your decision.

Step 5: Decide — and Commit

Once you decide, **act decisively**. Hesitation and reversal mid-evacuation (e.g., turning back into a wildfire) cause unnecessary deaths. If you decide to stay, commit to staying. If you decide to go, go now and do not return until authorities declare it safe.

Factors to Evaluate

The Threat Itself

- **Direction of movement** — Is the threat moving toward you or away?

- **Speed of development** — Hours, minutes, or seconds?
- **Duration** — Is this a 2-hour storm or a week-long siege?
- **Official warnings** — Is there a Watch, Warning, or mandatory Order in effect?

Your Location

- Flood zone designation (FEMA flood maps are publicly available ⁹⁾)
- Proximity to wildland-urban interface
- Elevation relative to rivers, coast, or water bodies
- Distance from hazardous facilities (chemical plants, nuclear sites)
- Urban density — does it trap you or protect you?

Your Home

- Construction type (wood frame burns; masonry resists wind better)
- Age and structural integrity
- Basement availability (tornado protection)
- Upper floors (flood protection)
- Ability to seal windows and doors

Your Resources

- **Food and water:** Do you have 72 hours? 2 weeks? ¹⁰⁾
- **Medications:** Enough for the expected duration, plus buffer?
- **Communications:** Battery radio, charged phone, backup power?
- **Fuel:** Vehicle fueled? Generator fueled?
- **Cash:** ATMs and card readers fail in power outages

Your Household

- Number of people and their ages
- Mobility limitations or medical needs
- Pets and livestock ¹¹⁾)
- Infants requiring special equipment or formula
- Language barriers that affect receiving information

If You Stay: Sheltering in Place

Deciding to stay is not passive. It requires active preparation.

The Stay Kit

Assemble and maintain the following:

Category	Minimum	Recommended
Water	1 gallon/person/day × 3 days	1 gallon/person/day × 14 days
Food	3-day non-perishable supply	2-week supply, manual can opener
Medications	Current prescriptions × 7 days	30-day supply
First Aid	Basic kit	Comprehensive kit with manual
Communications	Battery-powered AM/FM radio	NOAA weather radio + hand-crank backup
Light	Flashlights + batteries	Headlamps, lanterns, candles (with caution)
Power	Spare batteries	Portable battery bank, generator
Warmth	Extra blankets	Sleeping bags rated for outdoor temps
Sanitation	Basic supplies	Bucket toilet, waste bags if water fails
Documents	Copies of IDs	Waterproof bag with originals + digital backup

Shelter Rooms by Threat

- **Tornado:** Lowest floor, interior room, away from windows — bathroom or closet
- **Chemical/Hazmat:** Interior room, highest floor (most chemicals are heavier than air), seal gaps with tape and plastic sheeting
- **Nuclear/Radiological:** Interior room, most mass between you and outside — basement preferred; brick/concrete better than wood
- **Civil Unrest:** Interior room away from street-facing windows; lights out at night

During a Shelter-in-Place

1. Close and lock all windows and doors
2. Turn off HVAC, fans, and ventilation if chemical threat
3. Monitor official channels continuously
4. Ration supplies conservatively — you may be there longer than expected
5. Keep a log of time and events
6. Signal your status to family/friends via pre-arranged check-in



The “shelter in place” order is temporary. Authorities will issue an “all clear” when it is safe to ventilate and move freely. Do not self-release early based on silence or apparent calm outside.

If You Go: Evacuation Planning

Plan Before You Need It

The worst time to plan an evacuation is during one. Build your plan now:

1. **Identify your destination(s):** At least two options — a nearby friend/family location, and a further fallback. Know the address and route for each.

2. **Establish multiple routes:** Know at least two ways out of your neighborhood and two ways to your destination.
3. **Designate an out-of-area contact:** Someone outside your region who can relay messages between separated family members. ¹²⁾
4. **Plan for your pets:** Identify pet-friendly shelters or hotels along your route in advance.
5. **Practice:** Drive your routes. Know where gas stations are. Know where traffic bottlenecks occur.

The Go Bag

A pre-packed bag that you can grab in under 2 minutes. Maintain it year-round.

Item	Notes
Water	1 liter per person minimum for the road
Food	High-calorie, non-perishable bars or snacks
Documents	Passports, IDs, insurance cards, medical records — waterproof bag
Cash	Small bills; ATMs will be unavailable
Medications	7-day supply minimum
Phone charger + power bank	Fully charged at all times
Change of clothes	Weather-appropriate
First aid kit	Compact version
Flashlight + batteries	Headlamp preferred
Radio	Battery or hand-crank
Keys	Spare car and house keys
Pet supplies	Food, leash, health and vaccination records
Children's needs	Formula, diapers, comfort items
N95 masks	Wildfire smoke, disease, dust
Whistle	Signal for help if trapped



Keep your go bag by the door, not in a closet. The average successful evacuation of a wildfire takes under 5 minutes of preparation time when people have bags ready. ¹³⁾

Timing Your Departure

- **Voluntary evacuation order:** Go now. Don't wait for mandatory.
- **Mandatory evacuation order:** You are already late. Leave immediately.
- **No order, but threat is approaching:** Use your framework. If in doubt, go early.



The Katrina lesson: Over 1,800 people died in Hurricane Katrina. The majority of deaths were among people who delayed evacuation or could not evacuate. ¹⁴⁾ Mandatory orders are not suggestions.

On the Road

1. **Fill your tank before you leave** — do not rely on finding fuel en route
2. **Tell someone your route and destination**
3. **Monitor traffic and road closures** via radio
4. **Have paper maps** as a backup to GPS (cell service fails)
5. **Stay on designated evacuation routes** — shortcuts can dead-end
6. **Never drive through floodwater** — 6 inches can knock you down; 12 inches can float a car ¹⁵⁾
7. **Keep fuel above half a tank** as a general life habit during emergency season

At Your Destination

1. Register with local emergency management if going to a public shelter
2. Notify your out-of-area contact that you have arrived
3. Do not return home until authorities explicitly declare it safe
4. Document any damage with photographs before touching anything (insurance)

Special Populations



Standard emergency plans assume able-bodied, mobile adults. If your household includes any of the following, your plan must account for additional needs — and you should register with local emergency management **before** a disaster strikes.

Elderly or Mobility-Impaired

- Identify neighbors or community members who can assist with evacuation
- Contact local emergency management to be added to assisted-evacuation registries
- Ensure medications, mobility devices (wheelchair, walker), and medical equipment are in the go bag or can be quickly loaded
- Plan for longer departure time

Infants and Young Children

- Maintain a dedicated bag with formula, diapers, comfort items
- Carry current copies of vaccination and medical records
- Plan rest stops for long evacuations

Pets and Animals

- **Never leave pets behind** if avoidable — it leads to people returning into danger

- Identify pet-friendly shelters in advance (not all public shelters accept animals)
- Carry vaccination records, food, water, crates, and medications
- Microchip and tag all animals

People with Medical Dependencies

- Oxygen, dialysis, insulin, or powered medical devices require extra planning
- Contact your utility company — many maintain medical priority lists for outage response
- Know the location of the nearest hospital along your evacuation route

People Without Vehicles

- Know your local emergency transportation assistance program
- Coordinate with neighbors in advance
- Know the location of public shelter pickup points

Communications and Information

Receiving Information

Source	Best For	Limitation
NOAA Weather Radio	All-hazards alerts, 24/7	Weather-focused
Emergency Alert System (TV/Radio)	Broad emergency orders	Requires power
Wireless Emergency Alerts (phone)	Immediate local alerts	Requires cell service
Local government website / social media	Official orders	Requires internet
Neighbors and community networks	Real-time local intel	Accuracy varies



A battery-powered or hand-crank NOAA weather radio is essential. It operates when power, internet, and cell service are all down — the exact conditions under which you need it most.

Family Communication Plan

Establish these in advance:

1. One **local contact** (nearby family or friend)
2. One **out-of-area contact** (in a different region, unaffected by the same disaster)
3. A **meeting point** near your home if you cannot communicate
4. A **secondary meeting point** farther away
5. Agreement on a **check-in schedule** (e.g., every 6 hours)
6. All family members memorize at least two phone numbers

When Cell Networks Fail

- Text messages often get through when voice calls do not (smaller data packets)
 - Social media check-ins (Facebook Safety Check, etc.) can relay status
 - Ham radio operators provide community communication infrastructure ¹⁶⁾
 - Pre-arranged signals (e.g., a note on the door, a mark on a mailbox) for in-person communication
-

After the Emergency

The emergency is not over when the immediate threat passes. The return and recovery phase carries its own risks.

Before Returning Home

- Wait for official all-clear from authorities
- Check road and bridge conditions
- Do not enter if you smell gas, see structural damage, or water is still present

Inspecting Your Home



Do not use open flames (candles, lighters) when re-entering after a flood, earthquake, or explosion until you have confirmed there are no gas leaks.

1. Check for structural damage before entering
2. Look for gas leaks (smell), water damage, electrical hazards
3. Document everything with photos and video before cleanup
4. Contact your insurance company promptly
5. Do not eat food that has been above 40°F (4°C) for more than 2 hours ¹⁷⁾

Psychological Recovery

Emergencies are traumatic. It is normal to experience:

- Anxiety, difficulty sleeping, irritability
- Replaying events mentally
- Reluctance to return to normalcy



Reconnect with community. Recovery research consistently shows that social connection is the strongest predictor of psychological resilience after a disaster. ¹⁸⁾ Do



not isolate.

If symptoms persist beyond a few weeks, seek support from a mental health professional familiar with trauma.

Update Your Plan

After every emergency — even a near-miss — review and update:

- What worked in your plan?
- What did you wish you had?
- What would you do differently?
- Does your go bag need restocking?
- Are your documents still current?

Quick Reference Card

Print this section and keep it with your go bag.

Stay if:

- Tornado is imminent (no time to evacuate)
- Blizzard has closed roads
- Chemical plume is not in your direction
- No official evacuation order; home is structurally sound; you have 2+ weeks of supplies

Go if:

- Mandatory evacuation order is issued
- You are in a flood zone and rain is heavy
- Wildfire is within 5 miles and wind is toward you
- You smell gas, see structural damage, or have no safe room
- You have a medical need that cannot be met at home

Go Bag Location: Destination 1: _____

Destination 2: Out-of-area contact: _____

Local emergency management: _____

Fuel level rule: Never below ½ tank during emergency season

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Last reviewed: March 2026 — Review annually or after any emergency event.

This guide is for general preparedness education. Always follow official instructions from local emergency management authorities, who have access to real-time threat information.

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