

Emergency Preparedness Factsheet for People With Spinal Cord Injuries

May 2026

<https://msktc.org/sci/factsheets>

SCI Factsheet

This factsheet offers guidance on the steps that people with an SCI can take to prepare for an emergency. It covers emergency kits, supplies, plans, and drills. It also covers support networks and communication plans. It looks at ways to prepare for a power outage or natural disaster. It also discusses fire safety.

The Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center works with Spinal Cord Injury Model System (SCIMS) centers to provide free research-based rehabilitation resources for people living with spinal cord injury (see <https://msktc.org/about-model-systems/sci> for more information). This factsheet has been approved by experts from the SCIMS centers.

Introduction

Being prepared for an emergency is crucial for people with a spinal cord injury (SCI) as they have unique vulnerabilities and needs. This factsheet offers guidance on the steps that people with an SCI can take to enhance their safety during an emergency such as a natural disaster, power outage, or other unforeseen event.



Preparedness Steps

Emergency Kit Essentials

- **Medicines and health supplies.** Stock at least a week's supply of all your medicines. Also, stock needed medical supplies like catheters, feminine hygiene products, a compact mirror, wound care items, and hygiene products. Hygiene supplies should include accessible products such as no-rinse body wash, dry shampoo, easy-grip toothbrushes, toothpaste, deodorant, hand sanitizer, skin barrier creams, and disposable wipes.
- **Key papers.** Keep copies of your important documents in a waterproof container that is easy to get to. This includes your health insurance and medical history. It also includes a list of your emergency contacts and specifics about your SCI.
- **Survival items.** Make sure that you have shelf-stable food. You should also have one gallon of water for each person per day for several days. You will also need a water purification system like Safe Straw, a manual can opener, and basic tools (flashlights/headlamps, a battery-powered lantern, extra batteries, a portable phone charger, a battery-powered radio, an emergency whistle, and a waterproof folder with important documents).

Emergency Support Network

- **Build a support network.** Create a network of neighbors, relatives, and friends to help during an emergency. Make sure that they understand your needs and how to handle your equipment.
- **Share key information.** Make sure that your network knows where you keep your emergency supplies. They should have copies of your keys and any codes or passwords needed to access your home and belongings.



Accessibility Needs

- **Mobility preparedness.** If you use a wheelchair, have a lightweight manual chair as a backup. Maintain your wheelchair and consider getting extra batteries for power chairs.
- **Wheelchair documentation.** Make sure that you have documentation of chair dimensions and weight in a place that is easy to get to. Know how to instruct a first responder or unfamiliar caregiver on your chair's functions.
- **Limited hand function preparedness.** Make sure you have flashlights with large push buttons or motion activation, voice-activated smart speakers for calling emergency services, a medical alert device or emergency call pendant, an automatic door unlock or smart lock for emergency access, easy-open food packaging, and a portable grabber/reacher for retrieving items.
- **Accessible transportation.** Find transportation that is accessible by wheelchair and that you can use if you have to evacuate. Register in advance with the local paratransit and emergency management agencies that can help with transportation.



Communication Plans

- **Stay informed.** Use a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather radio and subscribe to alert services for updates. Make sure that you have ways to receive alerts if you have hearing or visual impairments.
- **Emergency contacts.** Put all emergency numbers and contacts in your phone. Keep a hard copy list in your emergency kit. Set up your Medical ID if you have an iPhone; it's on the Health app: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/105072>. Download the Samsung Health and Android Health Connect App if you have a Samsung or Android phone.

Handling Specific Situations

1. Power Outages

- **Backup power.** Have backup options for any equipment that needs electricity. This may include ventilators and power wheelchairs.
- **Electric company.** Let the electric company know about your needs. Fill out the paperwork needed to join the priority electricity restoration list if your area offers this service.
- **Plan for medicine storage.** If your medicine needs refrigeration, have a cooler and ice packs on hand as a backup.



2. Natural Disasters

- **Safe room.** Set up a safe room in your home that is easy to access and free from hazards.
- Make sure that someone outside your home is aware of your safe space in case you become stuck there and can't leave due to fallen debris.



3. Fire Safety

- **Smoke alarms.** Install smoke alarms, carbon monoxide detectors, and fire extinguishers in your home that are easy to access. Test them each month. Consider alarms with strobe lights or bed shakers if you have sensory impairments.
- **Evacuation plan.** Have an escape plan that meets your mobility needs and practice escaping from your home.
- **Call or contact the fire station that serves your neighborhood.** Update them on the location of your bedroom, your mobility status, and your health needs. They will keep a record of this information for use if there is an emergency call to your home.



4. Cold Weather Supplies

- Make sure that you have thermal blankets or cold-rated sleeping bags; extra winter clothes (coats, hats, gloves, and wool socks); a safe indoor portable heater (if available); and a snow shovel, ice melt, and sand for walkways.

Regular Maintenance and Drills

- **Regular checks.** Review and update your emergency plan and supplies on a regular basis.
- **Drill participation.** Take part in emergency drills organized by the local community or emergency management offices. This will help you to be prepared.

Additional Resources

- **United Spinal Association**—<https://unitedspinal.org>: Offers detailed guides and resources
- **Local emergency management office:** Can provide local resources and support
- **Your primary care physician:** Can offer personalized health management advice in emergency situations



Authorship

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Source: The content in this factsheet is based on research and/or professional consensus. This content has been reviewed and approved by experts from the Spinal Cord Injury Model Systems (SCIMS) centers, funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). The content of the factsheet has also been reviewed by individuals with SCI and/or their family members.

Disclaimer: This information is not meant to replace the advice of a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment. The contents of this factsheet were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number: 90DPKT0009). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this factsheet do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

Recommended citation: Coleman, D., Stull, K. D., Goad, L., Slocum, C. S., Heinemann, A., & Cowan, R. (2026). *Emergency preparedness factsheet for people with spinal cord injuries*. Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center (MSKTC). <https://msktc.org/sci/factsheets/emergency-preparedness-and-sci>

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