

The First 72-Hours

By James C. Jones, EMT/CHCM

*The great majority of emergencies last three-days or less
Even if the disaster is an extended cataclysmic event, surviving the first hours
and days will be critical.*

The Department of Homeland Security and FEMA advocate that everyone should have a "72-Hour Survival Kit". There are scores of articles and lists devoted to the contents of "72-Hour Survival Kit". These kits or packs are intended to provide a bare minimum of life critical supplies during a short evacuation to a safer location where food, water, shelter and medical aid will be available. Realistically, most homes have sufficient water, food and other supplies to get through a few days without outside support. The theory behind the 72-hour kit is that (1) it will take no more than 3-days for help to get to a stricken area or (2) it will take no more than three days for someone to walk out of a disaster area and reach help. Based on most recent disasters in the U.S., this is a reasonable assumption. Most disaster events unfold, peak and improve within 3-days. Most disaster areas are of limited size and can be evacuated from in a one to three day walk. Disaster response agencies take two to three days to fully respond to a major disaster. So for the purposes of surviving "normal" and localized disasters, 72-hours is a reasonable period to plan and prepare for. Keep in mind that the future holds events and trends that may generate be nation-wide in scope and months in length requiring much greater levels of personal preparedness. But here we will limit our analysis to the first 72-hours of any disaster scenario. We will establish a chronological examination of a general, non specific disaster and consider the challenges, needs and actions required to survive at each point in time. Keep in mind that failure at any of the time-points make the remaining time irrelevant, since you're dead.

The First Minute

While some disasters occur over hours or days many others are instantaneous. There may be an explosion, an earthquake, an assault or you may wake up to a smoke filled house. In such cases everything depends on actions in that first minute or two. Your options will depend on your training, planning and what items are immediately available to you. Bullets, blast, debris, smoke, heat, flailing objects, and flames are in your immediate environment. In some cases such as fires and civil disorders you may need to escape to a safer location but if bullets, debris or blast material are flying you must immediately find shelter. In a collapsing structure (e.g. earthquake, etc.) it is generally better to lie down next to some strong object such as a car, desk or cabinet than under it. If you are under them they will be compressed and kill you, but they will only compress so far, leaving a gap known as the triangle of life holding up the fallen walls a ceiling. Getting behind or under any heavy and secure object can protect from flying debris such as in smaller explosions, distant blasts, and strong winds. If

immediate shelter is not available lie flat and cover your head. Most bullets can penetrate furniture, auto bodies and interior walls. Seek shelter behind brick walls, trees, large appliances, auto engines and concrete structures. Many Japanese survived the nuclear blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki because they were sheltered behind walls or rocks while people a few yards away were incinerated and blown to pieces. In a burning building the air a few feet off the floor may be hundreds of degrees hotter than the air at floor level. One standing inhalation can shrivel your lungs and burn your airway closed. Role out of bed, get low now, and crawl to safety. Know the escape routs and have an escape plan for every building you are in. Smoke, dust, hazardous vapors and soot caused by blasts, fires, storm or biological hazard can stop your breathing or start a reaction that will be fatal in a few hours. Always carry a small folding N95 dust mask in your pocket and have one in your desk, lunchbox and bedside drawer..

The First 5-Minutes

Assuming that the hazard was less than instant or that you did the right thing and survived the first minute, you now can improve your chances and deal with immediate problems. This is the time period you have to seek better shelter, escape from the danger zone and treat life-threatening injuries. If you have that "72-hour kit" or other needed items, this is the time to grab them. In most situation, if you cannot get out in 5-minutes your chances are poor. Five minutes of exposure to contaminated air, radiation, excessive heat or cold can kill you. If you are bleeding heavily or going into shock you must stop the bleeding and get help fast. Most likely, if you cannot escape a structure in 5-minutes you are trapped. If this was an on-coming (tornado, etc.) disaster you should be in the best available shelter with your survival items in no less than 5-minuets.

If you survived a bomb blast or shooting incident, get out of the area immediately. Often there is a second bomb or the shooters return. Bullets and blast fragments may have struck supports, wiring, pipes or tanks that may cause a secondary hazard.

The First Hour

If you have survived the first few minutes and have made the right moves, your chances of survival are greatly improved. In the first hour you should either move further away from the danger area or improve your shelter and start to prepare for the next few days. Evaluate your situation, look around, make plans, calm down and take control. What do you have that can be used. Can you self-rescue (e/g. dig out)? Can you signal for help? Do a self-examination for injuries and treat them (bandage, splint, clean) as best you can. If you have been contaminated with chemicals, biological agents or fallout get out of any contaminated garments and/or clean them as best you can. Keep that dust mask on!

The First 8-Hours

In this time frame you should have gotten to your best available shelter and treated any serious injuries. In cold or rainy weather shelter and warmth become imperative. If you are exposed to cold for too long you will be subject to hypothermia (exposure) and die. Get into shelter. Get into dry clothing. That dust mask will reduce heat loss through respiration so keep it on. Put on a warm hat that should be in your survival kit. Water also becomes a critical need. Hopefully you can find some safe clean water. You can use 4-8 drops of bleach per gallon or boiling for 5-minutes to purify suspect water. Although you can (theoretically) last 3-days without water, your physical and mental state will deteriorate after a day or two so stay hydrated.

The First 24-Hours

Stay warm, stay dry, stay hydrated, avoid danger areas and dangerous people. At this point there are secondary hazards developing. People may be panicking, Criminals may be roaming the streets and looting. Fires may be out of control. Water, and sewer systems may not work and when the sun goes down there may be no lights. The best defense is camouflage and evasion. Criminals may be roaming the streets and looting. Fires may be out of control. Water, and sewer systems may not work and when the sun goes down there may be no lights. The best defense is camouflage and evasion. You need to avoid showing that you are there if you have taken shelter. If you are evacuating you need to avoid areas such as main roads and commercial areas that will attract looters and gangs. Yes, you need to be armed.

The First 48 Hours

If you are still in shelter, trapped, under attack, or on-the road after a full day, you have a serious situation. This is where you really need the stuff in that "72-Hour Kit". There will be some water, food and medical items in there. If you depend on prescription medications and/or eyeglasses be sure you have extras in that kit! You really start to get hungry by now. Theoretically you can go without food for three weeks, but after 24-hours the need for food starts to effect your judgment and health. If you have not accessed stored food or food in your pack, then you must start foraging. Foraging in urban and wilderness areas is difficult and hazardous. In many cases you will be competing for limited food with other desperate (and armed) people. It is fr better to have enough food on hand to avoid this necessity. Now you can evaluate your situation and decide if you need to just hang-on or take action to improve your chances. Waiting too long can be fatal, but so can taking a risk.

Reevaluate and improve

The First 72 Hours

If this is a true 72-hour emergency all you need to do is hang on. Rest, stay warm, conserve energy, drink water, signal for help, and do nothing to expose yourself to further hazards. This is the time for calm consideration, observation and maybe cautious reconnaissance. Whatever happened may have now generated a breakdown in law and order, epidemics may have broken out.

There may still be radioactive fallout or other contaminants in the air. Psychologically you are going to return to a safe mode or a “whatever it takes” mode as you prepare for the days and weeks to come.

Beyond 3-days?

In most cases you are going to make it if you got through three-days, but *if* it turns out to be an extended, wide area disaster where help will not be available for weeks and things will not return to normal for months or longer your chances of survival are still poor unless you have planned, prepared and stocked up for a longer siege.

The Kit List

In case you have somehow missed seeing a recommended 72-hour survival kit list, here is one. While you can buy prepackaged kits most of them are (in my view) poorly stocked and way overpriced. I recommend you go shopping and build your own kit for you needs. You really, really should get this put together today.

72-Hour Survival Kit List.

Backpack: I recommend a standard school or business backpack that will not attract undue attention.

Plastic bag with copies of your essential legal documents and identification

3, 1 pint bottled water or 1 full 32 oz canteen

Assorted energy/food bars adding up to 3000+ calories

1 N95 dust/mist respirator

1 plastic rain poncho

1 Space Blanket TM reflective emergency blanket

1 pair of HD work gloves

1 multi-tool or Swiss-Army TM knife

1 crank/batter powered AM/FM/Weather Band radio

1 4 – 10 LED Flashlight with extra batteries

1 12-hour light stick

1 whistle with lanyard

1 roll of electrical tape
1 box of waterproof camping matches

1 small first aid kit including assorted bandages, disinfectant, gauze, aspirin and tweezers, eye drops, etc.

Paper and pencil for leaving and taking notes

Packaged Handy Wipes™ or waterless hand cleaner and tissue
Optional items that may apply to your situation or be of use without adding much weight

- Spare glasses.
- Spare prescription medications
- A candle
- Heavy-duty aluminum foil 12 x 24"
- Water purification tablets
- Magnesium all weather fire starter
- Spare socks
- Wool cap
- Regional maps
- Handgun with spare magazine and ammunition
- Hunting size knife and/or small hatchet

The above list is by no means a "survival pack" or a "bug out bag", but it is lightweight low cost and easy to assemble from local stores. It puts the owner way ahead of those who don't have one ready in a serious emergency or evacuation. There is absolutely no excuse for not having one. I should also point out the considerable psychological comfort and sense of pride that comes from having your pack ready to go.