

Hurricanes and Tropical Storms

Learn about your community's hurricane risk. Contact your local emergency management office, National Weather Service office, or American Red Cross chapter for more information on hurricanes and how to prepare for them. Contact your local emergency management office or planning and zoning office to find out if you live in an area prone to flooding during a hurricane or heavy rains. If you live in a risk area, learn what types of supplies should be stored to protect your home from floodwater. Knowing the elevation of your property will let you know if forecasted flood levels will affect your home.

AWARENESS MESSAGES

Why talk about hurricanes?

There are no other storms like hurricanes on earth. Each year, on average, 10 tropical storms (of which six become hurricanes) develop over the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea, or Gulf of Mexico. Many of these storms remain over the ocean. However, on average, five hurricanes strike the United States coastline every three years. Of these five, two are major hurricanes, category 3 or higher on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale. Major hurricanes have sustained winds above 110 miles (177 kilometers) per hour.

Timely warnings have greatly diminished hurricane fatalities in the United States. In spite of this, property damage continues to mount. There is little we can do about the hurricanes themselves; however, we can prepare for hurricanes and alert people when a hurricane threatens. To this end, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Weather Service (NWS) field offices and Tropical Prediction Center cooperate with other federal, state, and local agencies; rescue and relief organizations; the private sector; and the news media in a huge warning and preparedness effort.

What are hurricanes?

Hurricanes and tropical storms are cyclones with tropical origins (tropical cyclones). Tropical storms have winds of 39 to 73 miles (63 to 117 kilometers) per hour. When these winds reach 74 miles (119 kilometers) per hour or more, the storm is called a hurricane. Hurricane winds blow in a large counterclockwise spiral around a relatively calm center known as the "eye." The eye is generally 20 to 40 miles (32 to 64 kilometers) wide and the storm may have a diameter of 300 miles (483 kilometers). A single hurricane can last more than two weeks over open waters and can run a path along the entire length of the eastern U.S. seaboard.

What hazardous conditions do hurricanes cause?

Hurricanes bring a variety of life-threatening hazards—chief among them is flooding. Most deaths due to tropical cyclones are flood related.

Hurricanes commonly cause inland flooding. Torrential rains from decaying hurricanes and tropical storms can produce extensive urban and river flooding, landslides, and mudslides in mountainous regions. Winds from these storms can drive ocean water up the mouth of coastal rivers, compounding the severity of inland flooding.

Talking About Disaster: Guide for Standard Messages

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