

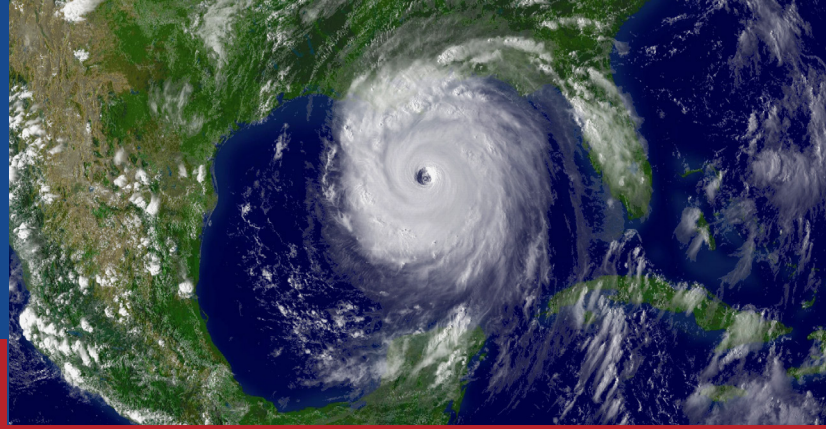


HCMS

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Updated for COVID-19

PREPARING YOUR PRACTICE FOR A DISASTER

As a physician, you need an emergency plan to deal with crises. Hurricane season began June 1, and in Greater Houston we have learned from our experiences with Hurricanes Ike and Harvey. Each brought new challenges and we have learned better ways to prepare for and recover from a disaster. Due to COVID-19, there are new considerations when preparing. For resources and information, visit www.hcms.org/DisasterPreparedness.

Be prepared: Develop a Disaster Plan

John F. Kennedy once said, "The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining." Developing a plan during a calm time, when there is no threat, is essential for the health of your practice. First, conduct a risk assessment of all potential emergencies; including procedures on emergency escapes, how to account for all employees and visitors, and where to report local emergencies. Then, practice the plan with your staff. Below are some key areas to consider as you build your plan.

Alternate location

Select an emergency off-site location in advance. Consider a neighboring community.

- Even if you cannot be completely operational, at a minimum plan for a receptionist and some basic supplies and equipment to manage emergency cases.
- Be sure to continue to practice the minimum standards of safe practice.
- Know your local hospital's disaster plan and where you fit in.
- Know your area's evacuation routes, shelters and emergency numbers, including FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

Shelter

Have a plan for where to find shelter quickly.

- In an office building, skyscraper, hospital, or nursing home, find enclosed and windowless areas in the center of the building away from any glass. Interior stairwells are usually good places to take shelter.

Disaster prevention should include:

- ✓ Disaster plan for practice
- ✓ Disaster supply kit
- ✓ Securing your practice
- ✓ Evacuation plan

Insurance coverage

Ensure that you have adequate insurance coverage for disasters.

- Check your policies to ensure you have business interruption coverage in a sufficient amount and understand the provisions surrounding it.
- Have adequate replacement insurance covering fire, flooding and catastrophic damage from natural disasters.
- Have insurance agents' phone numbers and email addresses.
- Inventory your practice's equipment for insurance purposes.

Employee communication

Communicate to staff as soon as possible about a possible office closure.

- Plan for payroll continuity. If a storm should approach prior to payday, include how direct deposit and paychecks will be handled and consider advance pay. Ensure your payroll processing business has off-site data processing.
- If possible, include in staff communications: evacuation details, storm surge zones, predicted strength, and track the storm.
- Collect staff evacuation information.
- Keep a list (off-site) of employees' phone numbers, email addresses, etc. As text messaging is more reliable in disaster situations, indicate on the list who has text capabilities.
- Update the list regularly as contact data changes frequently.
- Include a likely contact location for each employee and a phone number for someone who could serve as an alternate contact.
- Advise staff to prepare a personal/family emergency kit to include medicine and at least two cloth face coverings per person.
- Advise staff to prepare for an increase in COVID-19 cases after the hurricane or natural disaster.
- Order additional PPE to handle additional COVID-19 cases.

Develop a Disaster Plan

continued

Patient communication

Be proactive in educating your patients on the proper way to contact your office and prepare for a disaster.

- Post an alternate telephone number and e-mail address on your website and patient literature.
- Consider using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), which is a phone service that uses broadband Internet connectivity, as it is more likely to stay in service in the face of a natural disaster.
- Many answering services are down during a major disaster.
- Keep an old-fashioned phone in your office that does not require electricity.
- During disaster events, 2-1-1 Texas/United Way HELPLINE is activated by local and state emergency management officials to disseminate official information on shelter availability, evacuation routes, road closures and other important information.
- Encourage patients compile a list of physicians, relatives or friends who should be notified if they are hurt and ask them to provide the list to others.
- Encourage patients compile a medical information list that contains the names and numbers of physicians, medications, dosage instructions, and any existing conditions. Patients should make note of their adaptive equipment, allergies and any communication difficulties they have.
- Tell patients to keep their medical insurance and/or Medicare cards handy.

Special needs patient communication

Talk to your special needs patients about making a disaster plan for themselves. Below are some key things to include.

- Special needs patients can pre-register for evacuation transportation by calling 2-1-1 Texas/United Way HELPLINE. A trained specialist will take personal contact information and ask additional questions about any special medical needs that may affect the type of transportation needed. The Special Transportation Registry is open year-round for registration. Specialists have access to language interpreters in more than 150 languages.
- 2-1-1 Texas/United Way HELPLINE can assist with many daily needs before, during and after a disaster.
- Remind patients to wear medical alert tags or bracelets to identify their disability.
- Tell patients to locate more than one facility if they are dependent on a dialysis machine or other life-sustaining equipment or treatment.



- Tell patients to keep specialized items ready, including extra wheelchair batteries, extra hearing aid batteries, oxygen, catheters, medication, prescriptions, food for service animals, etc.
- Remind them to make provisions for medications that require refrigeration.
- Patients with dementia should be registered in the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return Program at 1-888-572-8566.

Information systems

Take steps to protect your EMR, billing and financial data.

- Make sure your data are backed up regularly, either to portable storage media or to an off-site server.
- Investigate automated back-up services and weigh the pros and cons of signing up with one or creating your own back-up.
- If you do your own back-up, remove it from the office each night to a secure location.
- Have a plan for restoring your data, once your office is operational again or you have set up an alternate location.

Documentation

If your patient charts are paper-only, devise a plan for protecting your patient records and other paper-based information.

Generator support

Consider having a generator to help ensure vaccines are kept safe and to help ensure your office continues to operate. You may want to consider moving vaccines to a different location (e.g., hospital which has a generator for backup power).

Vendor support

Set up a protocol for contacting your tech support and suppliers in the event of a wide-spread disaster.

- Keep a list (off-site) of all key vendors, which includes phone numbers, email addresses and websites.
- Update the list regularly. This kind of information can change quickly.
- In the event you need to establish operations at an alternate site, find out what emergency services your vendors provide and how to contact them.

Be Prepared: Secure Your Practice

When you hear you are in a hurricane's path, you should begin moving computers and delicate equipment to secure windowless areas, off the floor.

- Require all employees to back up computers.
- Remove office computer back up to an off-site secure location.
- Disconnect computer power. Move computers to a secure windowless location. Tape employee's name to his/her equipment.
- Know how to turn off electricity, water and gas. Have the appropriate tools. Remember, you will need a professional to turn back on your gas.
- Cover file cabinets with plastic sheets and make sure desk surfaces are empty, in case windows are broken.
- Bring outdoor furniture inside. These can become flying debris in strong winds.
- Stay out of elevators during disasters. You could become trapped if power is lost.
- Keep windows closed to avoid debris. It is a myth that you should open two windows to avoid a negative pressure build up.
- Have a similar plan for your home, family and pets.
- Make sure HCMS has your current email and/or fax so that you can receive emergency notices from HCMS, which are helpful before, during and after disasters.



Helpful Links and Numbers

Centers for Disease Control (CDC):
www.emergency.cdc.gov

City of Houston Office of Emergency Management:
www.houstonoem.net

Disability 911 (Supported by Baylor College of Medicine, Memorial Hermann/TIRR and The University of Texas School of Health Information Sciences at Houston)
www.disability911.com

FEMA:
www.fema.gov, 1-800-621-FEMA

Galveston County Office of Emergency Management:
www.gcoem.org

Harris County Medical Society:
www.hcms.org/DisasterPreparedness, 713-524-4267

Harris County Homeland Security & Emergency Management:
www.readyharris.org

Houston-Galveston Area Council Preparedness Resources:
<http://www.h-gac.com/hurricane-evacuation-planning/preparedness-resources.aspx>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA):
www.nhc.noaa.gov

Red Cross:
www.redcross.org

Routes from Texas Department of Transportation:
www.txdot.gov/travel/contraflow_publications.htm

Texas Medical Association:
www.texmed.org, 1-800-880-1300

Minimum Standards of Safe Practice during COVID-19:
tmb.state.tx.us/idl/E578A0DE-4200-0EA6-BFF7-A2187A4AFA48

Texas/United Way HELPLINE:
2-1-1

