

Health Recommendations for Relief Workers Fact

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Natural disasters and public health emergencies often require extensive relief efforts. In the wake of devastating hurricanes, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, pandemics, and other catastrophes, relief workers play a crucial role in providing immediate assistance and long-term recovery support. These dedicated individuals include health care professionals, emergency responders, utility workers, and volunteers who frequently face hazards and increased health risks while performing their duties. This fact sheet offers specific guidance for disaster relief workers to help them maintain their safety and well-being while carrying out their vital work.



Preparation

When responding to disasters, relief workers must prepare for potential shortages of electricity, safe drinking water, and food in affected areas. They should also prepare mentally for potential psychological impacts. Focus on packing only essential items, employing stress management techniques, and striving for self-sufficiency during the assignment.

Essential Items

Toiletries

- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Toilet paper.
- Sunblock (SPF 15 or higher).
- Insect repellent containing DEET or Picaridin.
- Personal hygiene products.
- Prescription eyeglasses and copy of prescription.

- Contact lenses and lens cleaner.
- Toothbrush and toothpaste.
- Skin moisturizer and lip balm.
- Soap and shampoo.
- Supply of medications with prescriptions.
- Lip balm.
- Razor with extra blades.*
- Scissors.*
- Nail clippers and tweezers.
- Cotton swabs.

Clothing

- Comfortable, lightweight clothing.
- Long pants and long-sleeved shirts.
- Hat.
- Boots.
- Rain gear.
- Gloves (leather for physical labor, rubber for handling bodily fluids).
- Bandana or handkerchief.
- Towel (highly absorbent travel towels if possible).

***Pack in checked baggage for air travel.**



Security and Miscellaneous

- Money belt and cash.
- Cell phone with charger.
- Portable power bank.
- Flashlight and spare batteries.
- Safety goggles.
- Sunglasses.
- Alarm clock.
- Waterproof watch.
- Multi-purpose knife.*
- Candles, matches, and lighter in a Ziplock bag.
- Ziplock bags.
- First aid kit.

**Pack in checked baggage for air travel.*

Health Recommendations

Vaccinations

Relief workers need to consult with a health care provider or travel medicine specialist 4-6 weeks before deployment if time permits to ensure they receive appropriate vaccinations based on their destination and specific risks.

Recommended vaccines include:

- Hepatitis A: This vaccine is highly recommended as hepatitis A is easily spread through contaminated food and water, which is common in disaster areas.
- Hepatitis B: Relief workers are at risk of exposure through blood contact, especially when treating injuries. The hepatitis B vaccine is strongly advised.
- MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella): This vaccine is important, especially when working in areas where measles may still be prevalent.
- Tetanus/Tdap: The tetanus vaccine is crucial as relief workers may be exposed to contaminated soil or debris that can cause tetanus infections.
- Influenza: An annual flu vaccination is recommended to protect both workers and vulnerable populations they may encounter.
- COVID-19: This vaccine is now included in the list of required immunizations for health care and relief workers.
- Polio: A booster dose may be recommended for workers in areas where poliovirus is circulating.

- Varicella (Chickenpox): This vaccine is recommended if the worker lacks immunity.

Additional vaccines may be recommended based on the specific location and nature of the relief work, such as:

- Cholera.
- Typhoid.
- Yellow fever.
- Japanese encephalitis.
- Meningococcal disease.

Injury Prevention

The risk for injury during and after a disaster is high. Relief workers should take preventive measures to ensure safety during recovery and cleanup efforts:

- Inspect worksites for structural damage and safety hazards before entering.
- Report hazards like downed power lines or gas leaks to authorities.
- Use proper lifting techniques and take frequent breaks.
- Wear high-visibility reflective vests and personal protective equipment.
- Stay clear of motorized equipment and debris piles during cleanup.
- Know the plan for contacting emergency personnel.
- Take frequent rest breaks, especially when lifting heavy, water-laden objects.
- Keep fire extinguishers onsite

and re-evaluate the fire evacuation plan for use during cleanup.

- Know any special hazards that may be present in areas where debris is being collected or deposited.
- Respect flaggers, traffic cones, highway channeling devices, and roadway workers.
- Ensure proper ventilation for generators and other fuel-driven equipment.
- Ensure natural gas or propane tanks are shut off.
- Get proper sleep and rest to prevent fatigue-related accidents.

Electrocution Risk

- Avoid downed power lines and keep all equipment at least 10 feet away.
- Assume all power lines are energized.
- Remain aware of potential electrical feedback from improperly installed generators.
- Use battery-powered lighting instead of open flames.



Food and Water Safety

Disasters can contribute to the spread of many serious food and water-borne diseases, especially since water supplies and sewage systems are usually disrupted.

Relief workers should:

- Practice frequent hand hygiene.
- Boil or chemically treat water if safe sources are unavailable.
- Be aware of foodborne illness symptoms and seek medical attention if severe.
- Avoid raw or undercooked food in disaster areas.

Insect and Animal Bites

- Use insect repellent and wear protective clothing to prevent mosquito bites.
- Be cautious of displaced animals, especially snakes.
- Seek immediate medical attention for animal bites, particularly from bats or skunks.



Other Health Risks

- Be aware of leptospirosis, a bacterial disease, which may occur when wading in contaminated waters.
- Watch for signs of heat-related illness and use sun protection.
- Pay attention to mental health needs that may arise from the loss of life, serious injuries, missing and separated families, and destruction. Seek support when necessary.

Communication

- Stay in touch with team members and follow established communication protocols to ensure everyone's safety.
- Document any injuries or exposures during the relief work for potential future medical follow-up.

Upon return, relief workers should undergo a medical evaluation. This evaluation should include psychological support if needed. Workers should seek health care immediately if they experience any unusual symptoms.





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