

What To Do In A Chemical Emergency?

The Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA) of 1986 establishes requirements for Federal, State, and local governments, as well as industry regarding planning and "right-to-know" reporting on chemicals.

This legislation builds upon programs aimed at helping communities to better meet their duties in regard to potential chemical emergencies. The right-to-know provisions help to increase the public's knowledge and access to information on the presence and releases of chemicals in their communities. States and communities, working with facilities, can improve safety and protect public health and the environment.

As part of this program, it is important that citizens be properly prepared to act in an emergency.

In case of a chemical emergency, you might be asked to take one of three actions: evacuate, shelter-in-place, or protect your breathing. Be sure you understand these actions. If you have neighbors who are hard of hearing, do not see well, or need additional assistance, please help them. Be sure they know what actions to take.

Shelter-In-Place Guidelines

The term "Shelter-In-Place" means to seek immediate shelter and remain there during a chemical emergency rather than evacuate the area. There are occasions when the option to evacuate the area is not considered (e.g., a time constraint, or when evacuation would subject you to greater risk). Unless otherwise instructed to evacuate, sheltering in a pre-determined safe location in your home or place of work is the preferred method of safely waiting out a hazardous materials release. In place sheltering usually lasts no more than one-to-two hours and preparations, made in advance, can ensure that the event is as comfortable as possible.

The decision to Shelter-In-Place (SIP) or evacuate is usually made by local emergency management personnel or a representative of the chemical facility experiencing the release. It is a good idea for you, if you live near a chemical facility, to make contact with the facility to find out what chemicals they may have on hand and what plans are in place to handle a chemical spill. In many cases, facilities have procedures in place to notify you in the event of a chemical release.

If you are asked to Shelter-In-Place, here is a list of what to do:

- First, remain calm.
- If you are outdoors go inside immediately (an interior room without windows is preferable). Do not call 911 unless you are reporting an immediate life-threatening situation. Do not attempt to get your children from their school or day care center.
- When inside, stay inside until your radio or TV says you can leave safely. This is most likely to be no more than a few hours, rather than a day or more.
- Staff members are trained to protect your children and will institute shelter-in-place procedures where they are located.
- Next, close all windows and doors. Place pre-cut plastic sheeting over windows, and tape in place. Taping cracks or openings provides more protection.
- Close all outside air vents. Turn off cooling, heating or ventilating systems. Cover cracks under doors with damp towels. If you have a fireplace, put out the fire and close the damper. Tape cracks and other openings such as electrical outlets and cable television outlets for extra protection. Keep pets indoors.
- Lastly, listen carefully to radio or TV for instructions from emergency officials.

Assemble your own Shelter-In-Place kit to aid you when the need arises. A simple kit can be assembled relatively inexpensively (usually under \$50.00) with the following items:

- A roll of plastic sheeting, precut to fit any windows in the room.
- A roll of duct tape.
- Bath towels to place under any openings in doorways (dampen towels first).
- A battery-operated radio, with extra batteries, tuned to the local Emergency Alert Station (EAS).
- Bottled water and some sort of snack food.

Shelter-In-Place At Work:

- In preparation for the need to "Shelter-In-Place (SIP)," prepare an SIP kit to include the items listed above. You should obtain enough plastic sheeting to cover all windows inside your pre-designated shelter room within your work area. (Choose an interior room in your work area with a telephone, computer with email, NOAA Alert Radio, and rest room, if possible). Plastic should be measured and cut to fit all outside windows in your shelter room. Use a marker to write on the plastic which window it is cut for.
- Also, in preparation, assure that all employees understand the concept of "Shelter-In-Place."
- Upon notification or realization that Shelter-In-Place is necessary due to an accidental or intentional chemical release, immediately check outside of your building (including hallways) and order everyone to get inside at once.
- Close all outside air vents. Turn off cooling, heating, or ventilating systems including exhaust fans in rest rooms.
- Close and lock all windows and doors. Nobody in or out until all clear is given.
- Use duct tape to place the pre-cut plastic over all outside windows in your shelter room.
- Use damp towels or rags to stuff up under doors in your shelter room, covering all cracks.
- Use duct tape to cover all cracks and other openings in the shelter room. These include electrical outlets and cable television outlets.
- Keep everyone inside until the all clear. This could be from one to three hours depending on the type, size, and location of the chemical release.
- Make a list of everyone's name inside your SIP zone.

Evacuation Guidelines

If you are instructed to evacuate, you may be instructed to move to a particular location. Usually, when an evacuation is ordered, there is very little time to gather and collect items that you will need while staying at the designated location. Therefore, the items that are listed below should be prepared and placed in a portable kit before an evacuation order is ever activated. The following steps are recommended:

- Stay as calm as you can. You should already know where to go and what to take.
- The following items are recommended for a portable evacuation kit:
 - This document.
 - Extra clothing.
 - Eyeglasses, dentures, drugs, other important medicines, and first aid kit.
 - Baby supplies.
 - Portable radio and flashlight.
 - Checkbook and credit cards.
 - Driver's license or other I.D.
 - Pet supplies.
 - Non-perishable food snacks.
- Remember to do the following:
 - Turn off the lights, appliances, heating, cooling or ventilation systems.
 - Leave freezer/refrigerator on.
 - Lock your house.
- Do not go to your children's school to pick them up. That could delay their move to a safer place. School officials will take special care of your children.
- Do not try to call your children's school. The phone lines will be needed for official business.
- Do not use your phones unless you or someone else you know is injured or too sick to do what is needed. If you must use the phone, keep your call very short.
- Use this document and your radio/TV will tell you what actions to take. Read it through and be sure you understand it. Clear up questions you have now, not later.
- Do not listen to rumors. Listen to your radio or TV for information.
- Use only one vehicle for your family.
- Please check to see if any neighbors need a ride.
- Keep your car window and air vents closed.
- Listen to local stations for reports about your route and other information.
- Drive safely, traffic will be heavy. Officers along your route will help you.
- If you need a ride, try to go with a neighbor, friend, or a relative. If you can't, officials will provide transportation.
- If children have to leave their schools for a safer place, they will be the first to move. Teachers and adults will take them to a safe place. You will be told by radio or TV where to pick up your children.

Breathing Protection Guidelines

If the action being requested by authorities during a chemical emergency is protection of breathing, the following guidelines should be followed:

- You should cover your nose and mouth with a damp handkerchief, towel, or other cloth to protect your breathing. Fold the cloth over several times.
- Close the windows and doors if you are in a building or a car.
- Turn off heating or cooling systems.
- Listen to your radio or TV for information.

What To Do If You Know There Is A Release and It's Coming Toward You

- You should be prepared to leave the area if directed by the authorities – police, fire, or emergency management officials.
- Be prepared to protect yourself, wherever you are, if evacuation isn't possible or necessary. Studies have shown that even poorly sealed buildings provide some protection from gas entering the building. Those results would indicate that if you are outside, you should enter your house, near by public building, or your automobile.
- Once inside, close off all outside ventilation, such as the air conditioner or windows. Taping cracks or openings in doors will increase protection. Stay inside and wait for the cloud to pass.
- If gas is entering the building, and you are in danger, a wet cloth or towel over your nose and mouth will act as a filter and offer some protection. Staying inside is safer than trying to outrun a release.
- If you are outside and can't possibly get inside, move crosswind (in a direction so that the wind is blowing from left to right or vice versa, but not into your face or from behind). This offers the best advantage for getting out of the path.
- Remain calm and receive instructions before taking any further actions.

This document is intended to be guidance only. More preparedness information can be obtained by visiting some of the links listed on Gordon County LEPC's website, such as the American Red Cross, Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).