HOME
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RESOURCE
CENTER

for do-self repairs

PREPARING FOR EMERGENCIES

It's not too long ago that people were obsessed with Y2K and the "Millennium bug," the fear that all computer-controlled systems would shut down at the beginning of 2000. Although those fears never materialized, the northeast regional blackout in August 2003 taught us that multiple systems can be affected when the electricity goes out for any reason. It's a good idea to have certain emergency preparations in place at all times, to stave off hunger and cold in case our power, water, or other support systems are interrupted for an extended period. The first step is to consider alternatives to our usual ways of doing things.

Many of us have gone without power (and natural gas, for that matter,) for several days after a winter storm. Most boilers and furnaces will not function without electricity. An alternative power source, such as a portable 5000-to-8000 watt generator, can keep the heat going (so long as you have fuel for the generator,) plus power the refrigerator and some lights. There are switching panels that can be installed in the main service box by a licensed electrician, which will allow the house wiring to distribute output from the generator. For many people, however, the cost of this system will be prohibitive; a small generator and panel will run well over $2000.

One low-tech and fairly low-cost method for heating is the living room fireplace. (Not to mention those lucky folks who have a fireplace in the bedroom, too). The heat will be localized, but you'll have at least one warm room. If you'll be using this source of heat, have the chimney checked and cleaned, if necessary, before winter. Make sure the damper is in good condition, too. Stock up on firewood early enough to allow it to season properly.

If you do not have a fireplace, in an emergency you will probably be looking for other ways to keep warm. One common misconception is that you can use a gas stove as a source of heat. That's not a good idea – the stove can add a lot of carbon monoxide to the air, and the heat can melt the control handles of the appliance. Similarly, kerosene heaters and ventless (natural gas or propane) space heaters can pose dangers. Our city fire and building departments prefer to see vented units that minimize the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning, and units that are fastened to the wall or floor and can't be knocked over. If you are forced to use a portable unit in an emergency situation, be sure to keep all combustibles well away from the heater, provide ventilation (such as a slightly-opened window), secure the heater to the floor (with nails or screws, for example), and follow all instructions from the manufacturer for its use.

Emergency lighting is important, but it's a good idea to avoid items that burn to provide light, such as candles, hurricane oil lamps, or propane lanterns. Consider battery-powered lanterns and flashlights to prevent accidental fires. New LED flashlights use less power, running for a longer period of time on a set of batteries.

Provisions need to be purchased in advance, and stored. Choose alkaline over the regular or "heavy-duty" batteries, as the alkaline models can be stored for a longer period of time – check the expiration date on the package when you purchase them – or buy alkaline batteries that can be recharged. Another battery-powered item to have on hand is a portable radio. Besides some entertaining diversion, it can warn you of emergencies (like school closings) and incoming weather.

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Jugs of distilled drinking water can be purchased and stored for long periods of time. We're normally urged to drink 8 glasses of water daily (in addition to all those cups of coffee!) Plan for the amount your entire household will need for one or two weeks – pets, too. Another source of drinking water you might consider is a small water purification unit, carried by camping supply and some sporting goods stores. Melted snow (make sure it's not "yellow") or collected rainwater can be made "potable" for cooking, washing, and drinking with a purification unit.

As for eating, that propane grill stored all winter out in the garage can roast, grill, or even boil foods for you. A small portable propane camp stove can be useful, as well. Both must be used outdoors to prevent problems, but either one can heat water for washing, as well as for cooking. Keep your pantry stocked with pre-cooked canned goods (i.e., vegetables, meats, soups, ravioli, and spaghetti,) to eliminate the need to keep a lot of food refrigerated during a prolonged power outage. (Don't forget that you'll need a hand-powered can opener!) A 48- or 60-quart picnic cooler can keep milk and fresh produce chilled, so long as you have ice.

Another thing to keep on hand is a supply of essential medications. If you must take prescription drugs, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about how long they can be stored, and under what conditions.

If the heat is off for an extended period of time in winter, it will be important to prevent frozen pipes. Shut off the water at the meter, and then open all the faucets to drain out as much water as possible. The last item of concern – and the one some people may consider the most important – is the toilet. Even if there is no water service, there will still be a need to eliminate body wastes. Short of digging a primitive latrine in your back yard (you'll find directions in an old scouting manual), water already used for washing or cooking (called "gray water") can be stored for re-use to flush a toilet. 1-1/2 gallons will flush through solid wastes when poured quickly into the bowl; keep a bucket on hand to hold the water.

Even though the millennium came without complicating our lives, sooner or later we'll almost certainly have to deal with a winter power outage of some sort. Preparations like these can make our lives easier during such times, but the most important thing is to PLAN AHEAD.