

How to Survive an Earthquake

Many countries around the world can be affected by earthquakes whose force can have devastating effects. In the last 50 years earthquakes with a magnitude of 6 or more on the Richter Scale have affected the following countries:

- Afghanistan
- Algeria
- Argentina
- Australia
- Armenia
- Bolivia
- Brazil
- Canada
- Cayman Islands
- Chile
- China
- Colombia
- Congo
- Costa Rica
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Dominican Republic
- Ecuador
- El Salvador
- Greece
- Guam
- Guatemala
- Haiti
- Honduras
- India
- Indonesia (Sumatra & Java)
- Iran
- Italy
- Japan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Mexico
- Mongolia
- Morocco
- Mozambique
- Myanmar
- New Zealand
- Nicaragua
- Pakistan
- Panama
- Papua New Guinea
- Peru
- Philippines
- Portugal (Azores Islands)
- Romania
- Russia
- Rwanda
- Solomon Islands
- Taiwan
- Tajikistan
- Tanzania
- Tonga
- Turkey
- Turkmenistan
- USA (West Coast & Alaska)
- Vanuatu
- Venezuela
- Windward Islands
- Yemen
- Yugoslavia

Please note that earthquakes may occur in other countries not listed above. If you are travelling to an area which is prone to earthquakes you will find the following tips helpful:

Before an earthquake or earth tremor:

- Know the location of gas and water shut-off valves and the fuse box and learn how to turn these off. Ensure others you are with know how to do this safely too.

- Keep a battery powered radio, torch, water (enough to last 1 week), non-perishable food (enough for 72 hours at least), a tin opener, cutlery, water purification tablets and first aid kit to hand. Also include clothing, footwear, heavy work gloves, sleeping bags or blankets, emergency “space” blankets and a tent or shelter. Keep a set of tools in the kit, a whistle, toilet paper, personal medication and toiletries.
- Keep a spare emergency supplies kit in your car or shed in case you are unable to retrieve the one you keep in your home.
- Keep important personal documents in waterproof containers eg passport, will, birth certificate, marriage certificate, important contact numbers, bank account and credit card details.
- Prepare an emergency plan and ensure your family members and/or staff and/or team are involved and are fully trained. Your chances of survival will increase if you prepare and practise your plans.
- If you live alone, develop your own emergency plan linked to friends and neighbours.
- As part of your emergency plan, it is helpful to develop an agreement that you will stay together with your household/neighbours/team unless there is a very good reason not to.

During an earthquake or earth tremor:

- Move only a few steps to a nearby safe place. If indoors, don’t try to leave the building while the shaking continues.
- Crawl under a table, desk or other sturdy furniture, or an archway and cover your face and head with your arms. In New Zealand they often use the phrase “Drop, Cover and Hold” ie drop down, take cover under a sturdy piece of furniture and hold on to it.
- The **only** exception to the “Drop, Cover and Hold” rule is if you are in a country with unengineered construction, and if you are on the ground floor of an unreinforced mud-brick (adobe) building, with a heavy ceiling. In that case, you should try to move quickly outside to an open space.
- Stay calm. Don’t be surprised by the noise of shattered glass and falling objects. The electrical supply may shut down and fire and burglar alarms often go off following an earthquake.
- Be reassuring to children who may be traumatised by the experience.
- Stay away from windows, mirrors, bookcases that could fall or cupboards whose contents may fall on top of you.
- Don’t use a lift (elevator).
- If you become trapped under debris, cover your mouth with a cloth or shirt and tap against a pipe or other object to make noise.
- Don’t shout for help unless you have to as you may inhale dangerous quantities of dust and you need to conserve your energy.

- If you are able to, leave the building as soon as the shaking stops and make for clear ground. Aftershocks can bring down a structure that has been weakened during the initial earthquake.
- If you are outside during a quake, steer clear of buildings, power and telephone lines.

After an earthquake or earth tremor:

- Check yourself and others for injuries. Administer first aid as necessary.
- Do not use the phone unless you have to report a life-threatening injury.
- Listen to the local news and keep abreast of further developments and advice. However, reliable information may be scarce in the immediate aftermath of an earthquake and may take a couple of days or even longer to become available, depending on how serious and extensive the earthquake is. Staying together with family or friends to support one another is really important as the lack of information, the fear of the unknown and worries about the safety of buildings and environment compound feelings of anxiety.
- Check for gas leaks by smell only. If you detect a leak, open all the windows and doors, leave immediately and report the leak to the relevant authorities.
- Expect aftershocks.
- Don't drive your car unless absolutely necessary. Roads may be badly damaged. Keep roads clear for police and emergency vehicles.
- Avoid any waterfront areas in case of a tsunami and head for higher ground. Evacuate the area immediately if a tsunami warning is given.
- Keep at least 10 metres away from fallen power lines.
- Pay particular attention to personal health and hygiene. Damage to sewers, a shortage of clean drinking water and poor sanitary conditions will increase the risk of you succumbing to diarrhoea and dysentery.
- Medical facilities may be non-existent and even basic medical supplies may not be available. Carry extra supplies of personal medication and a first aid kit.
- Follow local specialist advice in any risk situation, or otherwise carry out your own risk assessment. Many structures will already be severely weakened and may collapse in an aftershock. Watch out for loose electricity cables and travel in convoy if at all possible.
- Keep in regular contact with your employer, family and national Embassy.
- Even if you and your household escape physical injury it is likely that you will feel shocked and upset. You may feel disorientated and it is easy to forget things. This is a normal reaction. You may also behave out of character which can add to the anxiety inevitable associated with the event.
- If your home or accommodation is seriously damaged and you are looking for shelter, try to seek advice from the emergency services or local experts and take the prevailing weather conditions into account. A tent or a makeshift shelter on open ground may be considerable safer than a building which is familiar to you but may be at risk of collapsing in an aftershock.

Further Information and Guidance

Sources: Civil Defence - Government of New Zealand, US National Disaster Education Coalition, Southern California Earthquake Center, Center for Disease Control (CDC)

More information can be found in: 'The Traveller's Good Health Guide', Ted Lankester; 3rd Edition 2006.

InterHealth's Travel health Advice Centre (THAC) is available to travelwellplan subscribers. Please visit our website: <http://www.interhealth.org.uk/our-services-travelwell-plan-travel-health-advice-centre.html> to find out more.

Copyright © InterHealth

While InterHealth endeavours to ensure that the information published in this guidance note is correct, InterHealth does not warrant the accuracy and completeness of the material in this guidance note. The information in this guidance note is for information only and should not be used for self diagnosis or self treatment. Readers are always encouraged to seek medical help from a doctor or other competent professional health adviser.