

An Unpredictable Moment

Earthquakes strike without warning and can cause enormous damage.



Imagine a bright, sunny day. People are outside walking, running, or relaxing. Then without warning, the ground starts to shake. Trees topple and buildings crumble. People panic and scream. The shaking lasts only moments, but the entire landscape changes.

Earthquakes strike with little warning. Unlike other natural disasters such as hurricanes and tornadoes, there's nothing to see before they occur.

Earthquakes strike when tectonic plates below Earth's surface shift and move. Most earthquakes occur at fault lines—the places where the tectonic plates intersect.

If you live in an earthquake region, make sure your home is safe. Falling household objects often injure people. Make sure pictures and mirrors are securely fastened to walls. Secure top-heavy furniture to wall studs with the use of brackets. Tie down TVs and computer monitors with nylon straps or buckles that can be easily removed and relocated.

Create an emergency plan. Will you know where to reunite with family and friends in case you get separated? Keep a flashlight and shoes near your bed, in case an earthquake occurs during the night. The flashlight should be approved by the Mine Safety and Health Administration. These flashlights have been tested in dangerous conditions and will not give off sparks that could trigger gas explosions. Families in earthquake areas should have disaster kits. These kits include medicine, bottled water, snacks, batteries, a battery-operated radio, and heavy-duty plastic bags.



The USGS also offers suggestions for how to protect yourself when an earthquake starts. If you are indoors, drop, cover, and hold on. Get under a sturdy piece of furniture. If you can't do that, stay by an interior wall and protect your head and neck with your arms. Don't go outside until you are sure the earthquake is over.

If you are caught outside, get to an open area. Avoid sidewalks or areas near tall buildings. If you are in a car, pull over to the side of the road as soon as possible and stay in the car. Avoid bridges and overpasses, because they might collapse. If you're near the ocean, try to find higher ground after the initial shaking stops. Earthquakes can trigger huge waves called tsunamis.

Once it is safe to get up, move carefully so that you don't trip over fallen objects or run into debris hanging from the ceiling. It's usually best to leave the building until you know that it's safe. Damaged buildings are at risk for collapse, fires, or natural gas explosions. You should know where shelters might be located. They usually are set up in buildings that can hold many people, such as school gymnasiums or community centers. Keep in mind that it may take some time for emergency officials to find the safest building for a shelter.

After an earthquake, emergency workers may be too overwhelmed to help everyone. In many communities, people can take Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) classes. With proper training, ordinary citizens can help themselves and others.

*To experience an earthquake in rural Alaska,
turn to page 15.*

*To experience an earthquake in a city,
turn to page 45.*

*For an island earthquake,
turn to page 75.*