

Urban Camping When The Power Is Out

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The emotions that accompany living through a disaster then surviving the aftermath are many and complex.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to have a few limbs down or maybe lose some screens or a few roof shingles breathe a sigh of relief, but then feel unnecessarily guilty because we got lucky while our neighbors a few streets over are without power or lost belongings due to flooding, or had a tree fall in their car.

Even if we're without power, many of us would rather stay in our own homes rather than go stay with a friend, especially if it's a long-term thing.

Part of that is because home is home. All of your stuff is there and it's still your sanctuary, even if it's dark and hot. Part of it is also to protect your property. Unfortunately, the vultures circle after disasters and if they know that a household has evacuated, then the home is fair game for looting.



So, the alternative to imposing on friends – even if they don't feel that you're imposing – and leaving your belongings unprotected is staying in your home.

We have a laugh-or-cry joke that our houses turn into giant tents or RVs after a storm and we're camping in our homes.

And that's seriously, literally what we're doing. There's no power, which means there's no lights, no air conditioning, no technology, no hot showers, no refrigeration, and often no stove because most stoves here are electric.

The main difference is that we still have our beds, there aren't as many bugs, and the toilet almost always works. That's about it.

So, how do you live in a house that's been turned into a large tent? You take a deep breath, be thankful you still have a house to camp in, find shortcuts and you need to know how to do it safely.

Be Prepared

I probably don't have to stress the importance of preparation in general, but I will share some details that I've learned from experience.

First, don't wait till the last minute. Ideally, you should have most, if not all, of everything that you need stockpiled. If you don't, get your rear to the store as soon as you hear the first whisper of impending disaster. If you wait, you'll be too late.

Now, you probably think that if you have water, canned soups, and maybe ice stocked back, you'll be fine. Well, yeah, but you don't need to live that rustically.

Stock up on regular items, too. Chips, juice, a pack or two of Oreos, and maybe a case of beer or a couple of bottles of wine if that's your thing.

Those types of comfort items make a bad situation a little more comfortable—not that I'm suggesting you drink yourself silly during a hurricane when you're going to need your wits about you, but you may want to have a beer with dinner after the hurricane, when you're grilling the stuff from your freezer, and the stores may not have any.

Here are a few more items to stockpile:

- Charcoal
- Gasoline for generators and all vehicles
- Propane for the grill
- A generator will make your life a thousand times easier. You don't appreciate a fridge and fan till you don't have them
- Comfort foods such as chips
- Canned soups, canned fruits, and other foods that require minimal preparation and no refrigeration
- Board games
- Ice – frozen jugs full of water
- Hand sanitizer
- Batteries for your flashlights and games
- Jar candles or tea light candles – they burn for a few hours and if you drop them in a heat-proof jar, you get quite a bit of light with minimal heat.
- Matches and/or lighters
- Cold/hot neck wraps
- Baby wipes
- Water, sports drinks, instant coffee/tea
- Lighter fluid
- A large cooler
- Extension cord to run outside to the generator

You'll be surprised how much the items on this list will come in handy and will mke your life easier if you have to essentially camp in your own house.

Don't Mess with Power Lines

It never fails that at least one person dies after a storm because they don't heed his warning. Power Lines carry more than enough juice to kill you. Even if they're dead, if your chainsaw accidentally hits on one, it can kick back and kill you.

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As a matter of fact, this just happened during hurricane Irma. A guy was on a ladder trimming limbs off the power line, and his chainsaw snagged, hit the wire, kicked back up, and hit him in the neck. Completely horrible, and needless, way to die.

If the wires are down, assume they're hot and stay away from them. Move animals if you need to so that they won't get hurt either by the wire or the downed limbs and debris.

Don't Use Grills or Generators Inside

There were four fatalities in my area because people were running their generators inside the house and died from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Running [a generator in the house](#), even if it's well-ventilated, is akin to sitting in your car in the garage, with a tube running from the exhaust to the cracked window. Seriously. A generator should always be at least 15 feet away from the house – thus the extension cords on the list above.

Grills pose a double hazard if you use them in the house – you're breathing the smoke and gas/lighter fluid fumes, and you're also running the risk of burning your house down. That's certainly an instance of going from bad to worse! Seriously though, keep the grills – whether they're little camp grills or full-sized outdoor grills where they belong – outside!

Here are some alternative [methods to cooking](#) without power that may be better for you.

Keep Your Food Cold

Food poisoning would most certainly make urban camping life miserable, especially if it gets so bad that you need to go to a hospital that you can't reach or that is likely already inundated with disaster-related illnesses and injuries in addition to its standard load. Keeping your food at a safe temperature will go a long way toward helping keep you well.

There's a saying in the food industry – keep your hot food hot and your cold food cold. It's pretty self-explanatory, except for one are that many people overlook, especially when camping, urban or otherwise. That's what to do with food after you've already cooked it.

It's tempting to leave food out for several hours, especially when you have limited cooler or fridge space, but in order to close that room-temperature window of time when illness-causing bacteria likes to grow, get it cold again within two hours of cooking, or one hour if it's over 90 degrees where

the food is sitting.

Here's a cool way to make a [refrigeration unit with clay pots](#).

Now, to reduce the chance of raw food spoiling and making you sick, here are some suggestions:

- Keep meats separate from all other foods, and keep fowl away from red meat to prevent the spread of salmonella
- Don't let your food float in ice water in the cooler.
- Once the ice has melted and the water in your cooler is no longer icy cold, dump it. It's now a cesspool for bacteria. Use it to flush the commode.
- Cook thawed meats within a couple hours after they've reached room temperature if you don't have a source of refrigeration or within a few days if you've kept them cold. Watch for signs of spoilage such as smell, discoloration, or sliminess.
- If your meat thaws, don't just wait for it to go bad. Cook it up – that will buy you a couple of extra days if you can refrigerate it afterwards. If you have too much to eat by yourself, give it to a neighbor or somebody else that's in need. I promise you that for many folks, a hamburger or a piece of real chicken will taste magnificent if they've been living on canned food for three days. Whatever you do, don't waste it if you can avoid it.

Clean Up Flood Waters

Rule number one in staying healthy while you're urban camping. If your place was flooded, clean it up. Seriously – flood waters are cesspools for disease.

Scrub everything that you can with hot, soapy water and disinfect with bleach. Especially if your power is off, mold and mildew that can damage everything from your respiratory system to your heart and nervous system will start to grow within just a couple of days. The first thing you need to do is clean up any flood waters. Afterward, wash your hands.

Be Careful with Open Fires

Cooking on an open fire or even having a burn pile to clean up the yard can turn catastrophic quickly. Within just a few days after falling, tree leaves and limbs are excellent tinder, regardless of whether it's roasting outside or freezing, and a stray ash or spark can turn into an inferno in the blink of an eye.

Be even more careful with outdoor fires than you normally would because you may be existing in perfect-storm circumstances – plenty of dry fuel and a team of first responders that are stretched beyond their limits.

There are several different [ways to cook when the power is out](#), so fire may not be your best option. If it is, be careful.

Maintain Personal Hygiene and a Clean Living Space

As with any SHTF scenario, hygiene is a must. If you have no restroom, make sure that your modified one is in an area that isn't going to affect your food and water supply or stink up the area where you're going to be living.

Also, wash your hands frequently (hand sanitizer is awesome in this situation) and keep counters and other areas where food may come into contact clean. Dispose of food waste far away from the house.

Urban camping isn't going to be a walk in the park, but you can make it as comfortable as possible by avoiding sickness and making the best of things.

Maintaining a positive morale is every bit as critical as maintaining a healthy body – when you start to feel sorry for yourself, or angry, think about the family of the man who died in the chainsaw accident, the family who lost their home, and the small businesses that sustained catastrophic damage to inventory or storefront.

Things could always be worse; at least you have a house to “urban camp” in and friends and family who are healthy enough to be so cranky due to the circumstances that you want to smack them.

It may be tough, but you'll get over it. And that's all that matters in the end – everything else is just stuff.



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If you've lived through a situation that required urban camping and have some hints and tips to share please do so in the comments section below.

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