6 Things To Consider For Surviving (The Upcoming) Winter

October's here, fall is in full-swing and winter is just around the corner.

If I lived farther north, I would say that I could just about feel the first snowflakes in the air; but where I live, that's just about impossible. Nevertheless, the signs of winter are all around us, reminding us that we need to be prepared for cold weather and snow.

To those of us who are preppers, this means much more than just buying new winter coats and boots for our kids. It means being ready for that major storm which shuts down power and brings our cities to a standstill. It means having our cars ready to make it through that snowstorm. It means surviving, when others are freezing to death.

Historically, wintertime has been the most dangerous time for human survival. For those who live in cold northern and temperate climates, the year was divided into two basic parts for our ancestors: preparing for winter and surviving winter. The entire planting cycle was built around ensuring enough food to survive the next winter.

While modern agricultural methods and food preserving don't put us in as severe risk of starvation as our ancestors, that doesn't mean that we're free of risk. Every winter there are people who literally freeze to death or starve to death. Mostly, these are older people who can't afford an adequate diet or can't afford to pay their utility bills. But even for those who can afford it, when something goes wrong, they don't have the ability to fix the problem or take care of themselves, if they are not prepared.

Once again, this doesn't mean the rest of us are safe. On the contrary, it demonstrates how much of a risk we face, because they are some of the most vulnerable people in society. What happens to them, will eventually happen to us, if the problem continues long enough.

So the question that faces us all is what do we need to do, to make sure that our homes and our families are ready to face the winter?

Heating

The most critical item on our list is heating. Our modern homes all have central heating; but that heating is highly dependent on electricity, even if we have gas heat. Considering how easily our electric grid can be damaged, at least on a local basis, there's a pretty good chance that the power will go out during any major winter storm.

That means we need to be ready to heat without electricity. Or, to put it another way, we need some sort of alternate means of heating our homes. This is something we all know; but I have to ask, how many of us actually do it? How many actually have an alternate heating system in place?

For most, that means heating with wood; although there are other heating methods available (propane, kerosene, etc.). The actual method isn't as important, as it is to be sure that we have one and that the one we have is ready to use. That means it is installed and have been tested. A wood-burning stove sitting in a box in the garage isn't going to do you any good, if you don't have a mean of installing it quickly, at least for temporary use.

Inexpensive, Easy to Build Cellar Will

The other part of this question is fuel. I've seen a lot of people who have wood-burning stoves installed in their homes, but only have enough fuel to last a few days. Likewise, I've seen both propane and kerosene heaters, with only one 20 pound tank or one 5 gallon can of fuel. That might be enough to last a day or two, but that's about it.

It takes a lot of fuel to keep any of these heating methods running. Much more than most people realize. Therefore, it is essential to know exactly how much fuel your emergency heating system will take, so that you are able to stockpile enough to get you through any emergency.

At a minimum, we need to have enough of whatever fuel we're planning on using to last twice the longest time we can expect to be without electricity. In other words, if the longest time it has ever taken for them to get power back on in the area you live in is two weeks, you should have at least four weeks of fuel. That's just to make it through a worst-case winter storm, let alone what you should have for a full-blown grid-down situation, such as that which would be caused by an EMP.

Insulation & Weatherstripping

Most homes are less well insulated and weathestripped than we realize. Contractors get sloppy, especially on tract homes. In an effort to save time and money, they don't always make sure that homes are properly weather-sealed.

Making matters worse, the insulation and weatherstripping can be damaged over time. Paper-backed fiberglass insulation in walls tends to stay put, but if your home's walls have blown-in insulation, it will settle over time. So will attic insulation, which is even more important, as heat rises. If

you have a home which is more than 20 years old, chances are that you need to add more insulation to the attic, to make up for this settling.

In addition, the settling of a home can cause windows and doors to not seal properly, as well as causing cracks in walls, especially around those doors and windows. Most of those cracks are not large enough to allow air to pass through, but if they are not dealt with, they can become that big.

Every home needs an annual energy audit, which includes inspection of insulation and weatherstripping. A lot can happen to a home in one year, creating a necessity for repairs, where the year before there was no need. While many of these might be minor, especially if we catch them early, the can add up to a significant difference in how efficiently our homes hold in heat. Not only is that important to keep our utility bills down, but it is even more important to ensure that we don’t lose heat in an emergency situation.

Many utility companies offer free home energy audits. In addition, there are other organizations who will do so, especially for low-income families. Some of these organizations will also provide free weatherstripping and insulation for homes which need it. Check what’s available in your area and make sure your home is ready to face the winter.

Finally, make sure that your roof is ready to withstand the snow load that it will be receiving. If you can, get into the attic and look around for water damage to roof joists and roof sheathing. Prod the underside of the roof sheathing, everywhere you can, looking for soft spots. Inspect it from the outside as well, even if you can only do so visually, to verify that the shingles are intact.

Water

It’s easy to think that we wouldn’t have a water problem in the midst of a snowstorm, but that’s assuming that we’re dealing with a snowstorm. What if the problem is an ice storm or just an extremely long cold spell? Both could happen; cutting off our water, without providing snow to melt for water.

But even a snowstorm could leave us with water problems. The amount of water you get out of melting snow depends a lot on how wet the snow is. The rule of thumb that you will get 1/10th the amount of water as you start out with snow is an average. Dry, powdery snow will only give you 1/20th the amount of water.

To put that in perspective, a typical stockpot (for making soup, for example) is about 16 quarts. That means you will get somewhere between 0.8 quarts and 1.6 quarts of water from it. If you figure a gallon of water, per person, per day, a family of four would need to fill and empty that pot 20 times during the day to get enough water for drinking and cooking.

The easy solution is to have a larger pot, such as found in a commercial kitchen or what the Mexicans use for steaming tamales. But you’ll also need a heat source for melting all that snow, as well as sufficient additional fuel to keep that heat source running the majority of the day.

By the way, don’t forget that you’re going to have to stir that snow while melting it, so that it doesn’t scald. Yes, that’s a real thing. So, not only are you going to need the equipment and fuel, but someone’s going to have to invest a lot of time into melting snow. Better to ensure that you have adequate water stockpiled to take care of your family’s needs for a month or more.

Another important detail is that you should only drink warm water in such a time, as it will help to warm your body. Drinking cold water, on the other hand, will require your body to warm the water, expending more energy and making it harder for your body to maintain its core temperature.

Food

Food may actually be one of your least worries during such a time; but you shouldn’t ignore it. Your body needs more food in the wintertime, than it does in warmer weather, especially if you don’t have adequate heating in your home. Your muscles burn the energy stored in that food (simple sugars) in order to move and generate heat. So you need to keep eating, especially carbohydrates, to give your body the fuel it needs to keep itself warm.

It’s best to eat warm foods, like soups and stews during such a time, as they will provide your body with heat. Avoid cold foods as much as possible, as your body will have to expend energy to warm those foods up.

This means having a way to cook that food, in addition to having a way of melting snow. Once again, we’re looking at more fuel to keep the fire burning, so that you can cook. Fortunately, you won’t have to worry too much about keeping food cold to preserve it, as all you really have to do is put it outside or in the garage.

Transportation

Transportation can be a major issue in a heavy snowfall. Even if you have a four-wheel-drive truck or SUV, you might not be able to get through two feet of snowfall. I saw many a 4×4 stuck in the snow, back when I lived in Colorado. I even remember at time, when the snow was falling so hard, that I missed the street and drove right into someone’s front yard.

The thing is that as a society we have become way too dependent on cars and trucks for transportation. That means that when those means of transportation aren't available to us, we don't have any idea what to do. But in the wintertime, it really doesn't take all that much to render our vehicles inoperable.

How To Build a Small Root Cellar and Bunker in Your Backyard with $400

One possibility is to buy one of the various adapter kits which allows us to pull the wheels off of our trucks and replace them with tank tracks. That would be effective in the snow, but it's a very expensive option, running several thousand dollars.

Another expensive option is to have a snowmobile. But contrary to popular opinion, snowmobiles only work well across powder snow if they're running at full-tilt; they're really only for use on packed snow. If you stop to get your bearings, there's a good chance that you'll sink in. I know, I've done it and getting the snowmobile back out of the snow wasn't any fun.

A much simpler and less expensive option is snowshoes. While not easy to use, snowshoes allow trekking across the top of deep powdery snow. Today's snowshoes, which are usually fabric stretched over an aluminum frame, are rather inexpensive, while still being very effective. Using fabric, instead of webbing, allows them to be smaller and still support your weight.

While snowshoes may not be the best means of transportation available, they are one of the most effective means of crossing deep snow. If you had a toboggan to pull behind it, you could even evacuate a wounded or sick person to a major street, which will have a greater chance of being packed snow, rather than two foot thick powder. From there, it would be much easier for an ambulance to rescue them.

Communications

The last critical item I think needs to be mentioned is communications. You will need to have some means available to you, to find out what is going on, what the weather is doing, and what the government is doing to bring relief. That means some sort of battery-operated radio, along with enough batteries to ensure that you'll be able to use it.

Your cell phone will probably serve for outgoing calls, as it is unlikely that the cell phone system will go down. There are regulations that require power backup systems for telecommunications. But you'll need some way of recharging the battery. Forget about the idea of a solar charger in a snowstorm, you'll either need stored power (battery backup) or some sort of generator.

Even so, I would recommend having a landline phone, in addition to your cell phone, if you can. This would be especially important if you live in an outlying area, as the backup power for cell nodes in such areas are less likely to last, as they are in the city. On the other hand, landline phones require very little power, other than at the switching center, which has massive backup systems in place.

A Final Thought

As I was writing this, I found a common theme that I kept coming back to.

It was actually one of the major points I wanted to make, but it came up over and over again, without me trying to make that happen. That point was fuel. The biggest problem any of us is going to have in a winter survival situation is fuel. Fuel to keep us warm; fuel to melt snow for water, and fuel to cook our food.

Most preppers don't have adequate fuel stocks, even while they

have excellent stocks of other supplies. So before Old Man Winter comes to call, why don’t you take another look at your fuel needs and your fuel stocks. Perhaps it’s time to upgrade them.