

# Survival Challenges for the Elderly

September is National Preparedness month in the United States, with a focus this year on preparing older adults for disasters. We rarely touch on this in the prepping community, but the elderly generally have a harder time surviving any disaster, even something as commonplace as bad winter weather. Bugging out is generally not an option, unless a family member is willing to include them in their bug out plans, including taking the time to go by their house and pick them up.

This may not seem like much of a big deal, but the older someone gets, the more health problems they generally have. Adding those health problems to adverse environmental conditions can easily lead to dangerous situations and even to death.

My mother, who is 87 years old, has pleurisy (a lung condition) and has had pneumonia at least a dozen times. She lives in the Denver metro area and has been trapped in her apartment for several months now, due to the smoke coming down from forest fires in Canada. My mother-in-law, who lives in Corpus Christi, has similar environmental conditions to deal with, caused by Sahara dust that actually blows across the Atlantic Ocean, as well as smoke from agricultural fires in Mexico and Central America. These may not be issues to the average family, but they are to the elderly.

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Health conditions can cause severe problems for the elderly, as the body begins to break down and physical strength and

stamina decline. There are many things that the elderly cannot do for themselves, which they might have been able to do when they were younger. On top of that, they have need of medications to help keep their body chemistry in balance and everything functioning properly. Without those medications, their chances of survival diminish greatly.

Besides all that, the elderly face the problem of having to prepare on a fixed income, which is likely considerably lower than what they were earning while they were working. Yet, just like the rest of us, they need to prepare, so that they can survive whatever disasters come their way.

If you have elderly parents or other relatives, I'd recommend getting together with them and making sure they are ready to survive whatever disasters might come their way. You may not be able to go pick them up and bring them to your house; so, you want to make sure that their homes are ready for survival. That means making sure they have food, water and medicines; but there's more to it than that.

## **Dealing with Heating and Cooling**

Every year, I hear reports about elderly who have frozen to death in their homes, usually during some sort of a winter storm. The same thing happens in the summertime, although it doesn't usually make the news. Our bodies can only withstand so much of a change in temperature and having limited mobility makes that even worse, as we lose a lot of the natural heating and cooling that our bodies are able to provide for themselves, when we are not mobile.

As we all know, the energy required for heating and cooling is expensive, especially cooling. Elderly people who die from hypothermia typically die because they are unable to afford paying their energy bills. Many live in older homes, which are not as well insulated, making those costs even worse to deal with.

One key to surviving the vagrancies of temperature is to reduce the amount of area that needs to be heated and/or cooled. This is the basic idea behind programmable thermostats, which allow you to reduce the amount of heating or cooling when nobody is using that part of the house. While more work, we can accomplish much the same thing by opening and closing doors and vents, keeping the heated or cooled air from the home's HVAC system in the areas of the house being occupied. This is especially useful for those who have bedrooms in their homes, which are not in use.

Please note that you may have to lubricate or even replace vents in the rooms you want to be able to cut off, in order for this to work. Most vents are stiff, from a combination of age, lack of any original lubrication and dirt. I've gone so far as to drill holes in the lever for opening the vent and attaching dowel rods, so that there is a more accessible handle for opening and closing those vents.

## **Cooling**

For those living in warmer climates, the bigger challenge is cooling, rather than heating. Air conditioning can be more expensive than heating, making this harder for retired folk, living on a fixed income.

As with heating, it is possible to block off rooms that are not in use, reducing the amount of cooling required. The other thing that can be very helpful is using evaporative cooling. Simply draping a damp cloth over the front of a fan will produce air that is cooler than the ambient room air.

## **Dealing with Air Quality**

But there's more for the elderly to be concerned about than air temperature, as I mentioned above. Particulates in the air can cause serious problems for the elderly. Things like forest fires and excessively dry weather will increase the amount of

particulates in the air, causing lung and breathing problems. Fortunately, this is not all that hard a problem to deal with.

Obviously, it makes sense to keep as much of this out of the home as possible. That means ensuring that windows and doors close completely, without leaving any gaps, a common problem on older homes. It may be necessary to replace weatherstripping in order to keep that dust out.

The other thing to do is to filter the air that is in the home, especially in the most used rooms. Commercially manufactured room air filters exist in a variety of sizes, ranging in prices from about \$40 up to several hundred dollars.

Another option is to make a homemade room air filter. All that's needed for this is a box fan and a filter that would normally be put in a HVAC system. Most box fans are 20 inches square, which is one of the most common sizes for HVAC filters, making them easy to find. Choose a high-quality filter, preferably a HEPA filter, as that will remove more particulates from the air. The filter can be taped to the input side of the fan with duct tape, masking tape or packing tape.

## **Dealing with Shortages of Medicines**

One of the biggest concerns with the elderly is medicines. Most take maintenance doses of meds to take care of chronic problems like type-2 diabetes and high blood pressure. Not having access to their medicines can be life-threatening, especially in a stressful situation, such as a disaster.

The obvious solution is to stockpile the medicines that they need. If you have a good relationship with your family doctor, they can probably be talked into writing prescriptions for extra medications to keep on hand. But that doesn't mean that the insurance company will pay for those extra meds. You may have to pay full retail for them or buy them through Mark

Cuban's "Cost Plus" drugs.

Another option for those who live close enough to travel to Mexico, is to buy those extra meds from pharmacies in Mexico. The Mexican pharmaceutical industry is excellent and they sell what are essentially generic versions of many popular medications. There are a fair number of retired people who travel to Mexico yearly, in order to buy their year's supply of these medicines. The only ones they are unlikely to have are newer medications which are still protected by patent law.

The other thing to look into is natural replacements for those medications. The field of medicine started out with herbal medicines, even though the pharmaceutical industry speaks badly of herbal medicines today. While there may not be a natural replacement for every medicine known to man, there are natural substitutes which will work for the more common conditions. Learn which they are and grow them in your garden.

Keep in mind that medicines are subject to shortages, just like everything else. Some were affected by the shortages created by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early part of this year, one of the medicines I take regularly was almost impossible to get. I mostly had to do without for several months. While I survived that, it was not good for my body.

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# Dealing with Flooding

Another thing that can be particularly problematic for the elderly is flooding. This term conjures up images of waves stacking up 50 feet tall, wiping away everything in their path. Even so, most flooding is from a few inches to a few feet deep, with few floods reaching over ten feet deep.

The normal way to deal with flooding is to bug out; but as we've already discussed, that may not be possible for the elderly, especially if they don't have anyone to pick them up and take them. That leaves the option of getting above the floodwaters, before it is too late. In a two-story home, going to the upper floor will solve that problem. Otherwise, the only solution (besides a boat) is to get to higher ground. Make sure you know where the closest high ground is, near the home, and how you can get there quickly.

Never go into an attic as a means of trying to escape flooding; if the flood waters rise too much, whoever goes up there is trapped, unless an exit hatch exists.

Speaking of an exit hatch, it would be possible to install a dormer on most roofs, even if the attic is not occupied. That dormer could either have a window in it or a removable panel, which would act as an escape hatch. Taking that idea a step further, a balcony outside the dormer would both be decorative and practical, giving anyone trying to escape from the attic someplace to step, as they climbed their way further up the roof.