Staying Connected in a Disaster

Staying connected in a disaster is fundamental to the safety and well-being of you and your family. While modern telecommunications networks are resilient and have generally performed well in disasters, they are not immune to disruptions.

Canada’s telecommunications service providers have come together to provide Canadians with good practices to help you stay connected during an incident. These practices include tips for using your phone in a disaster as well as the steps to take to stay connected during a disaster.

Using your phone in a disaster

Limit your usage

When a disaster strikes, a natural reaction is to pick up the phone to contact family and friends. However, the sheer amount of traffic generated during a disaster can result in an overloaded telecommunications network, which means that critical calls may not get through.

- During the first hours after a disaster, use your phone for contacting emergency services and for urgent calls only.
- If you must use a phone, keep your conversation brief and convey only vital information.
- Avoid non-essential use of wireless Internet, particularly sending pictures and video.
- Use 911 for emergency situations only.

Tips for connecting

- Use text messaging, email or social media. These non-voice channels use less telecom network capacity and may work even when phone service has been disrupted.
- If you have been evacuated and have call forwarding on your home phone, use it to forward calls to your cell phone.
- If you must make a landline call and there is no dial tone, don’t hang up or click the hang-up button. Simply wait on the line for a few seconds for a dial tone.
- Use web applications like Facebook’s Safety Check or Google Person Finder to check on family and friends.

Tips on keeping your phone in working order

- Keep your cell phone dry. The biggest threat to your device is water, so keep your equipment safe from the elements.
- In an earthquake, make sure all landline phones are on-hook after the shaking has stopped.
- To check whether your landline is busy or has been destroyed, blow into the handset mouthpiece. (For cordless phones, ensure you’ve pressed the “Talk” button.) If you cannot hear yourself in the receiver and your phone is connected to the jack, the line may be out of service.
- To conserve your cell phone’s battery life, consider disconnecting the battery to avoid draining it. Reconnect it when necessary. Other ways to conserve power include reducing the brightness of your screen, placing your phone in airplane mode, and closing apps.
Preparing to stay connected

Create a communications plan

A communications plan is a key element of your personal and family emergency preparedness plan. Consider and plan how you will communicate in different situations. Below are some ideas for establishing a communications plan.

Know your numbers

- Compile contact information for your family members, friends and out-of-area contacts so that you can reach them at home, at work, on their cell phone, by email and on social media.
- Maintain a list of phone numbers for local emergency services (e.g. police and fire services, as well as hospitals) in case 911 services are not available.
- Program your cell phone with emergency contacts and keep a paper copy in your emergency kit, on the fridge and in an accessible place like your wallet or purse in case you're not at home in an emergency.
- Consider creating a group called In Case of Emergency or Emergency Contacts in your cell phone. If you are in an accident, emergency personnel may check your cell phone to reach someone you know.
- For children, designate someone for them to contact if they cannot reach their family members.
- If you are new to Canada or have recently moved to a new area, make arrangements through friends, cultural associations, and community organizations so that someone knows how to contact you.

Keep informed

- Identify key websites for finding out what is happening and what to do in an emergency. Your municipality and province’s websites as well as police and emergency management websites provide valuable information on threats and may offer alert services or post information for citizens during a disaster.
- Download mobile apps to your cell phone and subscribe to text and email alerts that let you know about bad weather, road closures and local emergencies.

Know where to meet

Your family may not be together when a disaster strikes, so set up physical and virtual meeting places.

- A virtual meeting place can be a social media site or voice mailbox. Family members and friends can leave messages about their status and arrange to meet in person.
- A physical meeting place is where you go once it is safe to do so in the event that you are unable to communicate.
- Appoint an out-of-town contact. This contact should live far enough away not to be affected by the same disaster. Family members and friends can contact that person with their status and plans to meet. An out-of-town contact can relay messages between your family and friends, allowing you to turn your attention to more immediate problems.

Build a communications kit

As part of your emergency preparedness kit, here are some tools to consider. Store them in a dry, accessible place, keeping in mind that you may be away from home when a disaster occurs.

- Keep a copy of your plan in your emergency preparedness kit and on the fridge, and provide one to each of your family members. Consider putting a copy in your children’s backpacks, as well in your wallet, purse or briefcase.
- Maintain a home phone that does not require an electrical outlet. Traditional phone service may work during power outages, but you may need to use a corded phone. Most cordless phones rely on electric power to operate. If you have a newer phone service that works on battery back-up equipment during an outage, consider having a spare battery. If you are unsure what kind of service you have, ask your service provider.

- Keep an extra battery for your cordless phone, cell phone or non-traditional phone service. Find out how long your batteries last, keep them charged, learn how to replace them, and regularly test your back-up batteries.

- Stock a cell phone charger that isn’t dependent on electrical outlets, such as a car, solar-powered or crank charger. If you plan on using your car to charge your cell phone or listen to the news, exercise caution. Don’t try to reach your car if it is not safe to do so, and be careful of carbon monoxide emissions from your car, especially if it is in an enclosed space.

- Stock a battery-operated radio that can keep you informed in case of emergencies on public safety issues and evacuation notices. Consider keeping a battery-operated, solar-powered or hand-cranked radio or digital portable television for use during power outages. Make sure to have charged or fresh batteries. Some hand-cranked radios can also be used to charge cell phones, but check the user manual before assuming this is the case.

Test your plan and equipment

The best way to ensure that your plan is effective and that your phone equipment will work in a disaster is to test them at least once annually, such as during Business Continuity Awareness Week or Emergency Preparedness Week.

- Check your contacts and information sources. Are they still accurate? Are there others to add?
- Test your tools. Do your batteries have a charge? Does your radio work? Do you and your family members know how to replace the batteries?
- Walk through your plan with your family and friends. You might even run a mock drill to ensure that everyone knows what to do.