

EMERGENCY SHELTER

Water is generally accepted as the most basic need in survival. You can generally survive about 3-days without water, but under many conditions you will die in less than a day without effective shelter. Adequate shelter can conserve water and prevent sunburn and hypothermia in hot conditions. A good shelter can conserve body heat, contain heat from a campfire, keep you dry and prevent hypothermia in cold conditions. Shelters can also camouflage you from view, protect you from hostile gunfire and even reduce the effects of radioactive fallout. Along with water, food, first aid and defense, shelter is one of the prime components of every emergency plan and survival kit. The shelter we carry, the shelters we build and the shelters we find are seldom going to be as adequate or effective as the one we normally occupy. This is one of the reasons why; evacuation should always be a last resort. Nevertheless, one must have that option in the event that home is untenable, destroyed or unreachable.

Sheltering at Home

Before we talk about shelters on the road and in the woods, lets consider the challenges of maintaining your home as an effective shelter through a disaster. A storm, bomb blast or civil disorder may damage your roof and blow out your windows. Nearby fires may throw sparks and embers to ignite your home. Looters may attempt to invade your home or set it on fire. Interruption of gas, water, sanitation and electrical supplies may make your home difficult to live in. Assuming that you have plenty of water and food stocked at home, you will need to be prepared to:

- (1) Replace all “normal” services with alternative methods. Have water gathering and water filtration methods. Stock plenty of food and medical supplies. Have a generator and fuel. Have a safe alternative heating system for heating part of your home.
- (2) Replace fire and police services with your own capabilities to extinguish small fires and deter would-be looters and miscreants. You can only hope to deter random small bands of criminals and extinguish small accidental or spark created fires. General mass disorder and/or spreading unchecked structural fires in your community will be beyond your capacity to stop. This is why you should be ready and able to evacuate with what you can carry. If these two scenarios are developing, don’t wait until it’s too late and safe routs are no longer available. Multiple fire extinguishers and adequate firearms may be enough to secure your home against limited threats. The fewer adults or children over the age of 14 you have, the harder it will be to fight fires and defend against intruders. Anything less than four active defenders will probably be overwhelmed and should consider evacuation in all cases.
- (3) Repair and reconfigure as needed to prevent damage and provide shelter throughout the crisis. This means having a good supply of heavy-duty plastic sheeting, lumber, nails, tape and tools. If you have room to store plywood that would be recommended. You will also need a ladder for reaching the roof. Have a plan and supplies needed to seal-off and heat just one or two rooms. If flooding is a danger or you depend on a sump pump for a dry basement, you should have a generator just big enough to maintain the pump or have a plan to clear out and write-off the basement.

Worst Case “I got nothing”

So, if all efforts to stay at home fail or you were caught away from home in some kind of emergency such as a storm, terrorist event, or you just got lost out there, you need to know how to find or make a shelter. Lets start with the “worst case” scenario. You were out to a “suit and tie” event and then you know what hit the you know what. You have no survival kit, no Space Blanket™, no cordage, no fire starter. You just have a small pocketknife because I told you ALWAYS CARRY A KNIFE. Lets say its cool, calm with rain in the forecast and you will have to cross country gathering supplies as you go. Since you are obviously still in a developed area, all you need to do is start looking for dumpsters, junk piles, construction sights, etc. where plastic sheeting, tarps, awnings, etc can be found. This is also where you can find a variety of rope, string, wire and other survival materials. A 12 x 12 ft section of plastic or canvas and some cordage and you are in business. If that option fails look for unoccupied buildings and vehicles for temporary shelter. Remember that in survival situations you may have to break-in to live. Other sources of shelter may include underpasses, bridges, culverts, open barns; storage sheds, even burrowing into a haystack.

What About The Car?

The automobile is the most ubiquitous and available shelter to be found in any part of the populated world. In many scenarios you would already be in a motor vehicle when the survival emergency begins. They are waterproof and windproof and usually fairly comfortable. But, they are poorly insulated metal and glass boxes that radiate away your heat in cold weather and become solar ovens in hot weather. Still, they will provide better and faster wind and rain/snow protection than most improvised shelters you could build so unless you have the alternative of a shelter and fire combination or a good tent, a vehicle is a good shelter. You can use your survival kit items (Space Blanket™, blankets, etc) to improve warmth and a few candles will raise the temperature significantly. The location of the vehicle is also critical. If you want to be rescued stay on main roads and stay with the vehicle, but if things have gone very bad, you want to get off of and out of site from any main road. Then camouflage it with snow, foliage etc. Under civil disorder conditions, don't even consider staying in your vehicle or an abandon vehicle on a main road or urban/suburban street. You are in a big flammable tin target. In hot weather use the vehicle only for shade and to tie your shade canopy to.

Building Survival Shelter

Assuming that you have neither a building or a vehicle as shelter options, you are going to have to use material you have with you (e.g. tarps, plastic, etc.) or natural and man made materials at hand. Select your site with care. Avoid hill tops that catch wind and avoid low areas that may flood and will hold cold air. Take advantage of any natural windbreaks such as thick trees, bushes or rock outcroppings. Below are a few shelter illustrations. There are many more possible designs. Use your imagination.

Live Free member demonstrates a small canvas lean-to shelter. Note the prepared fire reflector in foreground.

The lean-to shelter is the most common form of shelter. This shelter can be thatched with natural materials (branches, pin boughs, grass) or a tarp. If a tarp or plastic sheet is used no frame is necessary. They are best when you are able to put a campfire and reflector in front of them. The ideal use is to build two opposite facing lean-to shelters with the fire in between. This captures much more of the heat and provides good shelter for several people.

Typical lean-to shelter made from natural materials

Tripod shelters are strong and fast to put up. They are better at conserving body heat, but do not reflect and gather heat from a campfire very well.

The dome shelter is strong and can be built with or without an open side depending on whether you will have a fire or be conserving heat inside. All you need to do is find bendable saplings. You can cover it with natural or manmade materials. One of these that I built lasted over two years.

The teepee is strung, but you need to find or cut a good number of long poles and they will leak at the top/center. Of course you can put a small fire in the center for warmth, insect repellent and the updraft tends to deflect light rain

Live Free member with branch covered teepee shelter. Note smoke from fire inside

Most debris and bough shelters will leak in a heavy rain. If large sections of bark or very large leaves (tropical) are available, they can be overlapped 50% from bottom to top to provide a fairly dry shelter. Remember that rain usually comes with wind. Your shelter must face away from the most likely storm winds and be sturdy enough to survive. Material just spread over a frame or a tarp just strung between trees is not going to survive. True thatching will provide a good waterproof shelter, but takes a great deal of time and material.

Classic example off tight thatching on a hut I photographed in Hawaii

Thatching with grass

Conclusion

While you can carry a knife, flashlight, whistle, fire starter and many other survival items in your pockets, shelter materials are not so convenient. Shelter materials such as tarps, tents, plastic sheeting, and Space Blankets™ should be part of every survival kit, evacuation pack and vehicle emergency kit, but you need to be able to find shelter or make shelter from what you can forage. The choice, location and design of a shelter depends on the nature of the hazards (e.g. heat, rain, cold, hostilities, etc.) the material at hand and the time and manpower available. We have only explored a few options and a few basic methods here.