



**Lewis County Public Health & Social Services**

# **Health Beat**

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## **Get Medically Ready for Winter**

*by Rachel Wood, M.D., MPH, Lewis County Health Officer*

Changes in medicine and medical technology mean more people are living longer with chronic conditions than ever before in human history. While those extra years are certainly a benefit to our lives, they can also come with strings attached in the form of dependence on prescription medications, ongoing medical procedures, and different types of technology.

For people with newly diagnosed conditions, juggling their new medical realities can be difficult on an average day. They may be faced with any number of new challenges: maintaining new prescriptions, arranging time off for frequent medical appointments, learning to live with durable medical equipment, setting up accounts for in-home equipment and supply delivery, learning to navigate their world all over again now with assistive devices. All these challenges are just as real if they are a caregiver for a child, friend or other family member.

Then, once you think you have it all figured out, winter arrives. The power goes out. Roads become impassable due to ice, snow, or flooding. Clinics and pharmacies close. Durable medical equipment suppliers can't get to your house.

Now is the time to pre-plan solutions before those problems become life threats. Here are some recommendations on how to survive winter, even with limiting chronic medical conditions.

Important information: Make copies of the following documents that are easy to grab in a packet and take with you. Also send a copy of this information to a trusted person far enough away that they will likely be unaffected by whatever winter weather is causing your local problems.

- Photo ID
- Who and how to contact in case you have an emergency. This should be a trusted family member or friend who can speak for you in a medical emergency if you are unable to speak for yourself.
- Medical providers' contact information and why you see each one
- Prescriptions and pharmacy contact information
- Medical insurance cards
- Medical equipment and supply vendors contact information and your account numbers

Pharmaceuticals: Always have at least a seven-day supply of prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, and supplements you rely on. Even if you have to purchase a small amount of extra prescription medication out of pocket, it will be a small price to pay if you have no access or alternative later on.

Electricity-dependent equipment: Can your oxygenator or C-Pap machine run on battery back-up? How long can your electric wheelchair run on a charge? Do you need a portable generator to operate or recharge equipment? Now is the time to answer these questions and prepare for power outages. Contact your equipment providers for the most accurate information.

Stock emergency supplies: Talk with your medical supplier about having extra oxygen and associated materials on hand for emergency use in case they can't deliver for a period of time. Again, there may be an upfront cost, but when you need oxygen, the cash you didn't spend will be a poor substitute.

Stay or go: Depending on how long the bad weather is predicted to last, you might be better off leaving home for the duration. This can also be pre-arranged with a friend or family member. The first question is whether, given the conditions, it is safe to leave your house. If so, who can assist you if needed? You may only need to move temporarily to where you can get the resources

not available at your house. Or, you may need to temporarily leave the area to reach somewhere safely away from the dangers.

Pre-planning temporary housing can prevent having to go to a public shelter, or worse, suffer in silence in your own home. Temporary housing arrangements can work both ways, too. Create your own network of trusted people who will open their homes to care for each other when needed.

Winter does not have to be more dangerous simply because of your medical challenges. Get yourself organized with even just these five suggestions. It will vastly improve the odds of your seeing another bright new spring that modern medicine has waiting for you in the new year.

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