

HOW TO SHUT OFF WATER, GAS, AND ELECTRICITY

Find your main water valve, your gas shutoff, and your electrical panel now, and show everyone in the house where they are. Turn off the gas only if you smell gas, hear it hissing, or officials tell you to: once it is off, only a qualified professional can turn it back on.

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After an earthquake, a flood, or a storm, the first job in a damaged house is often stopping water, gas, or electricity. Ready.gov says natural gas leaks and explosions cause a significant number of fires after disasters, and that electrical sparks can ignite leaking gas. This page covers the three shutoffs, a fire extinguisher, and the alarms that warn you about fire and carbon monoxide. Learn them on a calm day, with everyone in the household.

SHUT OFF THE MAIN WATER VALVE

Use this when a pipe breaks, when lines may be cracked after a disaster, or to keep the water in your water heater and toilet tanks from draining out of the house.

1. Find the shut-off valve on the main water line where it enters your house (Ready.gov). This is not the street valve in the cement box at the curb: Ready.gov says that one is extremely difficult to turn and requires a special tool.
2. Tag the valve so it is easy to identify.
3. Show everyone in the household where it is.
4. Close the valve all the way to make sure it works. Ready.gov warns that a valve may be rusted open or may not close all the way. If yours does not close, replace it.
5. After a disaster, if your water lines may be cracked, shut the valve off until authorities say the water is safe to drink. Ready.gov says cracked lines may pollute the water supply to your house.

Check: the valve closes completely, and every adult in the house can find it without help.

Shutting the main valve also traps the water already in your water heater and toilet tanks, which gravity could otherwise drain (Ready.gov). For using that water safely, see emergency water.

SHUT OFF THE GAS

Use this only if you smell gas, hear a blowing or hissing noise, or officials tell you to.

Before an emergency:

1. Call your gas company and ask how to shut off the gas at your meter. Ready.gov says shut-off procedures differ between meter configurations, and the gas company can help you prepare.
2. Make sure everyone in the household knows the procedure for your meter.
3. Practice the motions, but do not actually turn off the gas when you practice.

If you smell gas or hear a blowing or hissing noise (Ready.gov):

1. Open a window.
2. Get everyone out of the house quickly.
3. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve if you can.
4. Call the gas company from a neighbor's home.

Check: everyone knows where the meter is and what the shutoff looks like, and nobody turns the gas back on.

■ WARNING

If you turn off the gas for any reason, only a qualified professional can turn it back on. Never try to turn it back on yourself (Ready.gov). CDC adds: if you smell gas or suspect a leak, leave the building, contact emergency authorities, avoid anything that could make a spark, and do not go back in until you are told it is safe (CDC). FEMA says not to use gas appliances after a disaster until a professional can inspect them (FEMA).

SHUT OFF THE ELECTRICITY

Use this when gas may be leaking, when water has reached outlets or wiring, or when a damaged house is not safe to power. Ready.gov says to teach all responsible household members how to do it.

1. Find your electrical panel (circuit box) before you need it (Ready.gov).
2. Make sure you can reach it from a dry spot. If there is standing water and you can reach the main switch from a dry location, turn the power off. If you would have to step into standing water to reach it, do not: call an electrician to turn it off (CDC).
3. Switch off each individual circuit breaker first.
4. Then switch off the main breaker. Ready.gov says to always shut off all the individual circuits before shutting off the main circuit.

Check: lights and outlets throughout the house are dead.

■ **WARNING**

Never turn power on or off, or use an electric tool or appliance, while standing in water. After a flood, have an electrician check the house's electrical system before the power goes back on (CDC).

In an ordinary outage you usually do not need the main breaker. Ready.gov says to turn off or disconnect appliances, equipment, and electronics to avoid damage from electrical surges when the power comes back. For the rest of an outage plan, see what to do when the power goes out.

USE A FIRE EXTINGUISHER

Use this only on a small fire that is contained to a single object or surface, like a pan or a wastebasket. For building and putting out a cooking or campfire outdoors, see how to build and put out a fire safely.

Ready.gov says to keep at least one up-to-date fire extinguisher, an ABC type at minimum, and to make sure everyone in the household knows where it is and how to use it. The U.S. Fire Administration says multipurpose extinguishers labeled "A-B-C" can be used on most types of home fires, and to look for the "UL Listed" or "ULC Listed" label.

First, decide whether to use it. USFA says use an extinguisher only when every answer is "yes":

- Have you alerted others in the building that there is a fire?
- Has someone called the fire department?
- Are you physically able to use a fire extinguisher?
- Is the fire small and contained in a single object or to a surface?
- Are you safe from the fire's toxic smoke?
- Do you have a clear escape route?

If any answer is "no," or you are unsure, alert others, leave the building, and call 911 from a mobile or neighbor's phone. USFA says young children and older adults should not use fire extinguishers.

Then remember the word PASS (USFA):

1. **Pull** the pin. Hold the extinguisher with the nozzle pointing away from you and release the locking mechanism.
2. **Aim** low. Point the extinguisher at the base of the fire.

3. **Squeeze** the lever slowly and evenly.
4. **Sweep** the nozzle from side to side.

Check, before you ever need it: USFA says to make sure nothing blocks your way to the extinguisher, the pressure gauge (if it has one) reads in the recommended range, and the can, hose, and nozzle are not damaged, dented, or rusted. Follow the label: some extinguishers need to be shaken monthly, and some need pressure testing every few years.

■ **TIP**

USFA says to use a fire extinguisher only if you have been trained in its use, and that your local fire department can help with training (Ready.gov). Ask them about a class.

TEST SMOKE ALARMS

Do this once a month. USFA says that when a smoke alarm sounds you may have less than 2 minutes to get everyone outside, and that an alarm with a dead or missing battery is the same as having no alarm at all.

1. Test every smoke alarm in the house, following the maker's instructions for your model.
2. Replace a 9-volt battery at least once every year.
3. For a hardwired alarm, replace the backup battery at least once every year.
4. Replace the whole alarm every 10 years. For an alarm with a sealed 10-year battery, replace it as the maker's instructions say.
5. Check placement: alarms inside and outside each bedroom and sleeping area, and on every level of the home, including the basement, on the ceiling or high on the wall.

Check: every alarm sounds when tested, and everyone in the house can hear it from where they sleep. USFA says your family is not safe if they cannot hear the smoke alarms.

If an alarm goes off from cooking or shower steam, do not take the battery out. USFA says to open a window or door and press the "hush" button, wave a towel at the alarm to clear the air, or move the alarm several feet away from the kitchen or bathroom. Disabling an alarm can be a deadly mistake.

TEST CARBON MONOXIDE ALARMS

Do this monthly, and always before you run a generator or any fuel-burning heater or stove in an outage.

1. Test each CO alarm. CPSC says to test CO and smoke alarms monthly and replace batteries if needed.
2. Check the batteries when you change your clocks each spring and fall (CDC).
3. Replace the alarm following the maker's instructions or every 5 years (CDC).
4. Check placement: battery-operated or battery backup alarms near every sleeping area (CDC), and on each level of the home and outside separate sleeping areas (CPSC).

Check: each alarm sounds when tested and runs on a battery, so it still works when the power is out.

■ DO THIS

If a CO alarm sounds, never ignore it. Get outside immediately and call 911 (CPSC).

For CO symptoms and where to run a generator, see generator safety.

PRACTICE LIST

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- ☐ Found, tagged, and fully closed the main water valve
- ☐ Asked the gas company how to shut off our meter, and showed everyone (without turning it off)
- ☐ Found the electrical panel and practiced circuits first, then the main
- ☐ Walked through the USFA checklist and the PASS steps with our extinguisher
- ☐ Tested every smoke alarm and noted battery and replacement dates
- ☐ Tested every CO alarm and checked the batteries

TRACK

Survival skills

SHEET

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COMPILED FROM THESE SOURCES

- 1.** Ready.gov, Safety Skills
- 2.** Ready.gov, Power Outages
- 3.** CDC, Guidelines for Cleaning Safely After a Disaster
- 4.** CDC, Safety Guidelines: Reentering Your Flooded Home
- 5.** FEMA, Don't Wait to Clean Up or Make Repairs
- 6.** U.S. Fire Administration, Fire Extinguishers
- 7.** U.S. Fire Administration, Smoke Alarms
- 8.** CDC, Carbon Monoxide (CO) Poisoning Basics
- 9.** CPSC, Winter Storm May Knock Out Power; CPSC Warns of Deadly Carbon Monoxide and Fire Risks (2026)

Every safety claim on this sheet links to its primary source.