

Ten tips to help you and your home deal with storm season

By Erin K. Witt

As spring and summer approaches, many homeowners have seasonal planting, landscaping and home maintenance on their minds. But unfortunately, the warming weather can also usher in another, less-pleasant season—storm season.

Hurricanes and tornadoes are by far the most destructive catastrophes in the United States. The two combined accounted for two-thirds of the damage from large-scale disasters over the past two decades, according to the Insurance Services Office.

May is the month when the most tornadoes hit. Roughly a quarter of the 1,200 U.S. twisters per year touch down in May, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. April, May and June are by far the heaviest tornado months, though twisters happen year-round.

The threat of disaster looms large for homeowners—especially in Indiana and other parts of the Midwest. Only fires cause more losses than hurricanes and tornadoes, which dwarf even flood and earthquake damage.

Here are 10 tips that can help you prepare for catastrophes, and help to respond if you're unlucky enough to have your home caught up in one.

Tip #1: Just in case—prepare early. Insurers typically have a 30-day waiting period before insurance will kick in on a newly purchased property. So it's best to check if you have sufficient coverage right from the start.

Tip #2: Just in case—make sure you have enough coverage. With many homes increasing in value, it's worth evaluating once a year whether you have sufficient coverage. Homeowners may need to purchase extra coverage for wind and storm damage, and flood insurance is normally not covered in your homeowner's policy.

Tip #3: Just in case—take inventory. To help with the claims-filing process, many insurers recommend that renters and homeowners make an inventory of their possessions and keep a copy of it off-site. A home video is a particularly effective way of keeping inventory. Note brand names and model numbers on the inventory, and keep emergency phone numbers for your insurance agent, insurance company and the Red Cross along with this list.

Tip #4: If disaster strikes—make necessary temporary repairs. Plug any holes and gaps and keep the receipts—they're refundable under your insurance policy. But any insurance settlement will combine the cost of temporary repairs with the overall settlement, so bear in mind that excessive temporary costs will effectively mean you pay more for permanent repairs.

Tip #5: If disaster strikes—call your insurance agent or company. Report the damages and find out whether you are covered, the amount of your deductible, the amount of your coverage and what records the insurer wants you to compile.

Tip #6: If disaster strikes—save receipts for living expenses. Your insurer typically covers costs such as for hotel rooms, food, emergency supplies and transportation that you incur because of a disaster. Normally, your insurance will cover 20 percent of the coverage of your total policy, above and beyond any cost of repairs.

Tip #7: If disaster strikes—prepare for the adjuster. Faced with a big number of claims, adjusters normally resort to a sort of "triage" after a large-scale disaster, handling the worst first. So don't expect immediate attention if your damage is minor. If they are overwhelmed, adjusters may also pay a quick visit and return for a more complete evaluation. The more records and notes you have, the quicker your claim gets processed. Your insurer may also send you a "proof of loss" form to fill out before a visit from the adjuster.

Tip #8: If disaster strikes—make a list of damaged items. If possible, note the brand names and models of any lost or damaged equipment. Photographing the damage is also a good idea. Work from memory if you don't have a written record or an inventory, noting purchase dates, prices and so on. Do not throw away damaged items; the adjuster will want to inspect them.

Tip #9: If disaster strikes—make a list of property damage. The adjuster will want to inspect any structural problems, cracks, missing tiles, etc. Your insurance company will likely also pay for an inspection of the electrical system. Though you will receive an adjuster for free, you can also hire your own adjuster—but such "public adjusters" charge a fee and may take as much as 15 percent of your settlement, and aren't covered by your insurance. Avoid door-to-door solicitations and check qualifications with your state insurance department if you decide to go that route.

Tip #10: If disaster strikes—get bids for the repairs. The more detailed the bid, the better. Make sure the bids come from licensed contractors and reliable companies. They should break down the repairs line-by-line.

