BEREITSEIN HANDBOOK

THE BEREITSEIN HANDBOOK

All in-depth guides in one document – to read, print and file. Start small, stay calm, prepare step by step.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

Does not replace instructions from the authorities or a first aid course. Every statement is backed by a source – the sources are listed at the end of each chapter.

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CHAPTER 1

GETTING THROUGH A POWER CUT

What fails when during a power cut, how to keep light, warmth, food and information going – and why you need no extra kit for EMP or solar storms.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

DO NOW

1. Check whether only your home is affected (fuses, neighbours)
2. Switch on a battery radio
3. Switch off sensitive devices, leave one lamp switched on
4. Keep the fridge and freezer closed
5. Save your phone battery – text instead of calling

AT A GLANCE

- Germany's power supply is one of the most reliable in Europe. Most outages are over within minutes or a few hours. But they can last for days – as in the Münsterland region in 2005 and in Berlin's Steglitz-Zehlendorf district in early 2026.
- Much more than the lights goes out: the cooker, the fridge, usually the heating too (including gas and oil heating), internet and landline, soon afterwards the mobile network, card payments, cash machines, petrol stations, traffic lights and lifts. In tall buildings the water may stop.
- The most important preparation is simple: a torch, a battery or wind-up radio, drinking water, food that needs neither fridge nor cooking, cash, warm clothes and blankets, a charged power bank.
- The biggest dangers are not darkness and cold but **carbon monoxide** (barbecues, stoves or generators used indoors) and **fires** caused by candles.
- EMP and solar storms sound dramatic but need no special equipment: if you are prepared for a long power cut, you are prepared for them too.

START SMALL

You don't have to do everything in one weekend. Pick one of these little tasks each day – each takes ten minutes at most and costs next to nothing.

- **Find your torch and test it.** Where is it, do the batteries still work? Give it a fixed place that everyone in the household knows – even in the dark.

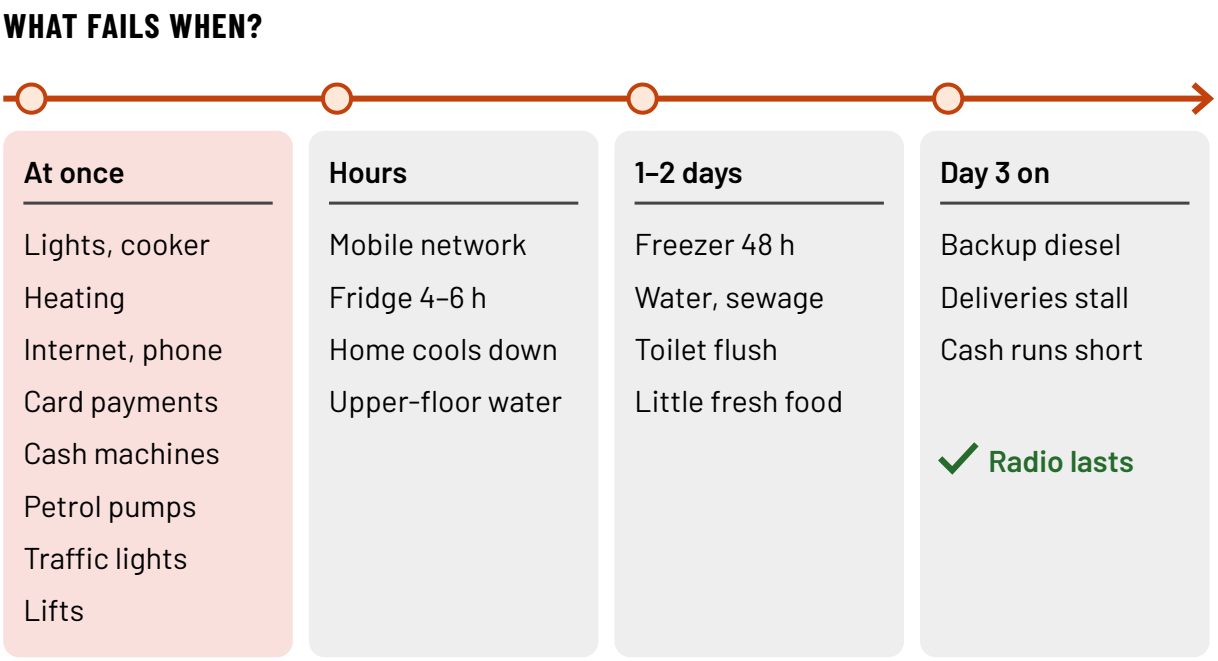
- **Find the fuse box.** Where is it, and can you get to it in the dark? Note its location under Home, together with the name of your grid operator (it's on your electricity bill) and its fault number.
- **Look at your heating.** What kind do you have – gas, oil, district heating, heat pump, stove? Most need electricity for the pump and controls. Is there one room you could keep warm?
- **Check your radio.** Do you have a radio that runs on batteries or a crank? If not, put it on the shopping list. Until then, the car radio is your back-up.
- **Numbers on paper.** Write the most important phone numbers on a slip of paper and keep it with the torch.
- **Charge a power bank.** Charge it today and put the right cable with it. Set a reminder to top it up every few months.
- **A little cash.** Put aside a small amount in small notes and coins – cash machines and card payments don't work without power.

UNDERSTANDING

Why so much depends on electricity

Almost everything that "just works" in daily life needs electricity – often in a place you wouldn't think of. Gas heating needs it for the circulation pump and controls, the waterworks for its pumps, the supermarket for tills and doors, the petrol station for its pumps. When the power fails over a wide area, many things that seem unrelated stop at the same time.

What matters is the timeline: some things go at once, others hold out for a few hours because they have batteries or back-up power, and others only run short after days. Knowing this lets you calmly do the right things first.



Timeline: lights, heating, internet, card payments, traffic lights and lifts fail at once; after hours the mobile network and fridge; after one to two days the freezer and water; from about day three back-up fuel and deliveries run short

At once

- **Lights, cooker, oven, kettle** – everything connected to the mains.
- **Heating:** Not just heat pumps and electric heating – many oil, gas and district heating systems fail too, because controls, circulation pumps and regulators need electricity. Only some wood, coal or log-burning stoves work without mains power. How quickly it gets cold depends on the outside temperature, insulation and heating system.
- **Internet and landline:** Routers and fibre connections need power. Since landlines now run over the internet (voice over IP), your home phone goes silent at once.
- **TVs and computers** – and many radios that plug into the wall.
- **Money:** Cash machines, card terminals and tills stop working. Many shops cannot sell without back-up power; some still sell goods for cash in daylight.
- **Petrol stations:** The pumps need electricity.
- **Traffic:** Traffic lights and street lights go out; in the first hours there are delays and accidents, especially in towns and cities. Trains can come to a halt between stations.
- **Lifts, door openers, car park barriers** stop.

After minutes to hours

- **Mobile network:** Mobile masts have back-up power only in part and only for a short time. According to a report for the German Bundestag (2011), depending on operator and location they

may fail after 15 minutes or last up to eight hours. On top of that, networks quickly become overloaded during unusual events.

- **Fridge:** With the door shut, it stays cold for about four to six hours, depending on how full it is and its insulation.
- **Your home cools down.** In winter you will clearly feel it after a few hours.
- **Water pressure in tall buildings:** Pumps that create the pressure for upper floors stop if they have no back-up power. Then little or no water reaches the upper floors.

After one to two days

- **Freezer:** With the door shut, a well-filled freezer often holds its temperature for up to 48 hours.
- **Water and sewage:** Waterworks usually have back-up power for their central plant, but not everywhere and not indefinitely. Depending on where you live, water and sewage can fail – and then the toilet won't flush. Storage in the network often only bridges a few hours to about a day.
- **Shopping** becomes difficult: many shops stay shut, and perishable food is hard to find.

After several days

- **Back-up power runs short:** Critical facilities such as hospitals or waterworks are meant to manage at least 72 hours on back-up power without refuelling. After that, a lot depends on whether diesel can be delivered.
- **Deliveries stall:** Food, medicines, cash and fuel arrive only in limited amounts.
- **Radio keeps going:** Broadcasters can often keep transmitting on back-up power. You can then listen with a battery, solar or wind-up radio, or in the car.

Water and sewage – why it depends on your floor

Whether you have water depends on where you live. On the ground floor the pressure from the mains is often enough; on higher floors it isn't if the booster pump in the basement fails. Sewage needs pumps too; if they fail, toilets, sinks and showers can't be used, or only partly. How to build an emergency toilet is in the Hygiene and emergency toilet guide; how to store drinking water is in the Drinking water guide.

Communication – why the radio matters more

Without power, TV, internet and landline go off at once, and the mobile network soon after. That also takes out warning apps and phone alerts. Radio stations keep broadcasting, though – which is why a radio that works without a socket is your most important link to the outside world in an emergency. The car radio counts too.

PREPARING

Germany's Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK) recommends that a household can manage **ideally for ten days** without outside help; even three days helps a lot. Start

with what you have and add to it gradually. The supplies calculator shows what your household is still missing.

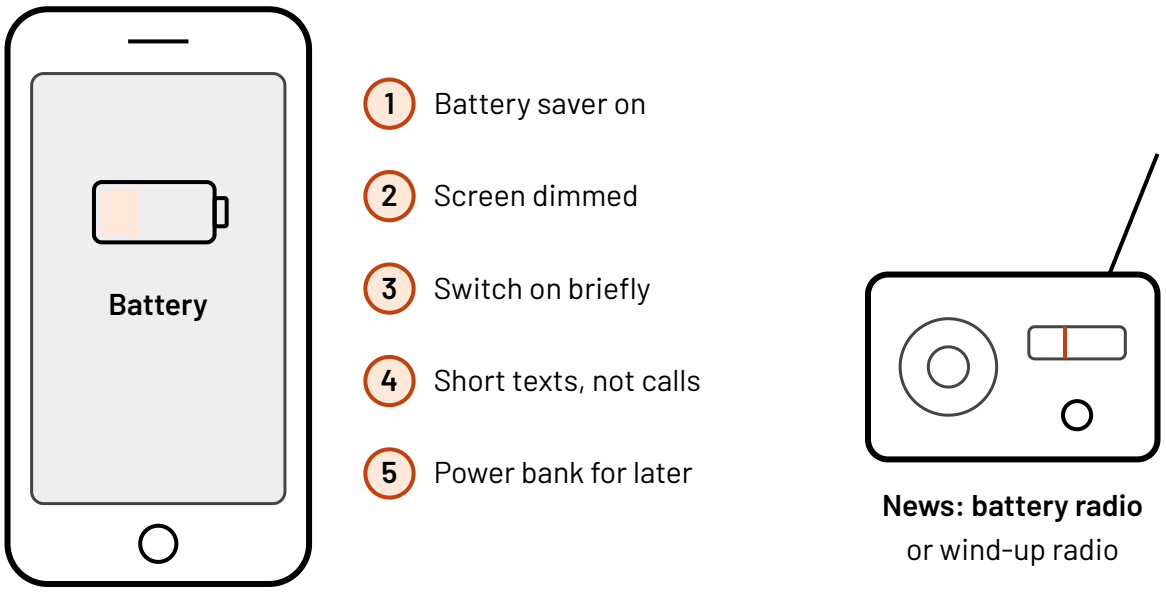
Light

- **Torches and head torches** (LED) are the best choice, with plenty of spare batteries. Wind-up torches need no batteries at all.
- **Camping lanterns** help to light a whole room.
- **Candles** are possible, but only with care: never unattended, on a non-flammable surface, away from curtains – and air rooms with candles regularly, even in winter.
- A **smoke alarm** in every living space adds safety; fires caused by candles are a known problem during power cuts.

More on torches and batteries: Equipment.

Information and communication

- **Radio:** a battery, solar or wind-up radio and spare batteries. Also check whether your phone can receive FM at all – radio apps that stream over the internet stop when the network does.
- **Power bank:** charged, with a cable. It slowly loses charge on its own – so top it up regularly.
- **Keep batteries charged:** phone, laptop and cordless phones charged whenever possible.
- **Numbers on paper:** A handwritten list helps if you can't get to your saved contacts.
- **Offline map:** Download the map of your area in the app while you still have a signal.
- **Know your help point:** During longer outages, many local authorities open help points, in Germany often called "Katastrophenschutz-Leuchttürme" (disaster lighthouses). There you can get information and make an emergency call if the phone doesn't work. Calmly ask your local authority where yours is.
- **Household arrangements:** Where will you meet if phones don't work? More under Signal.

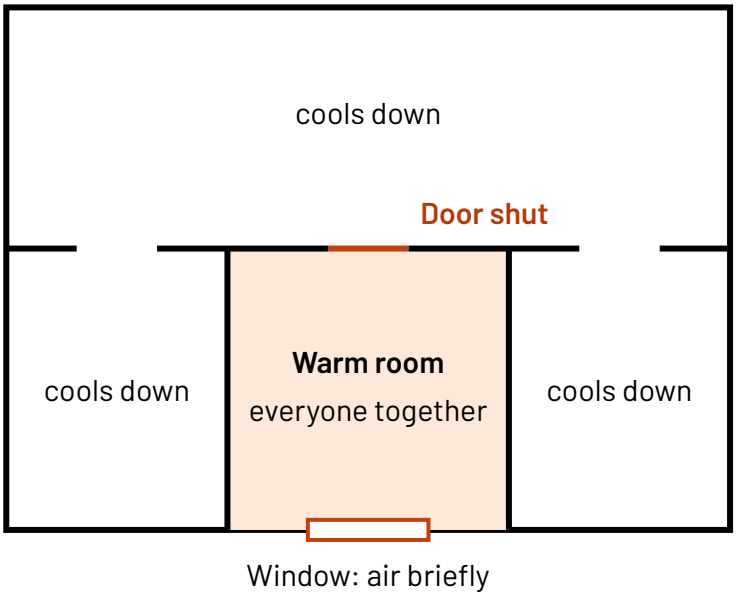


Saving your phone: battery saver on, screen dimmed, switch on only briefly, short texts instead of long calls, power bank for emergencies; news from a battery radio

Warmth

- **Warm clothes, blankets, sleeping bags** replace the heating for quite a while. Think of hats, warm socks and slippers.
- **Choose one room** to stay in. Keep its doors shut so the warmth doesn't escape.
- **Still air the room:** regularly open the windows wide for a few minutes, then close them again.
- **Hot-water bottles** can be filled with water from a camping stove that you use outdoors or on the balcony.
- **Stove or fireplace:** If you have one, keep a supply of wood, briquettes or coal.
- **Alternative heaters:** There are gas heaters, bioethanol fires and paraffin heaters approved for indoor use that work without electricity. Only use such devices indoors – and with gas devices, make sure they have oxygen-depletion and flame-failure safety devices. The BBK explicitly recommends a tested **carbon monoxide alarm**.

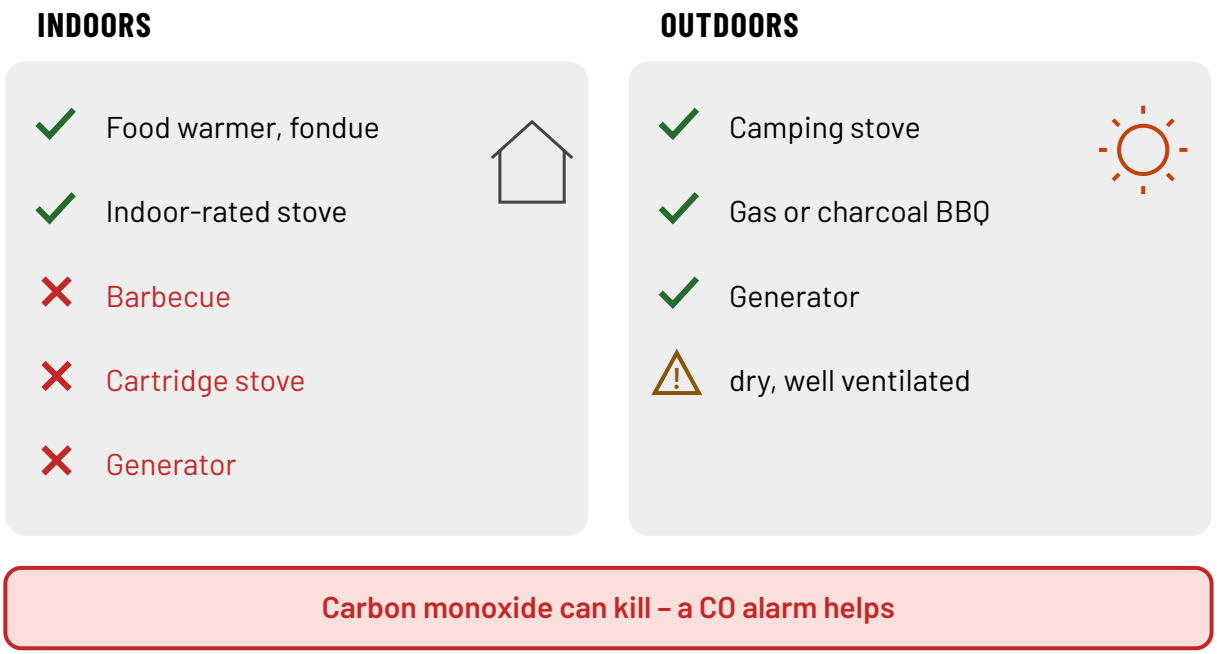
In detail: the Warmth without heating guide.



One room becomes the warm room: everyone in one room, door shut, clothes in layers, blankets and sleeping bags, air briefly but fully at regular intervals

Food and cooking

- **Supplies that need no fridge:** Food that doesn't need chilling won't spoil. Food that doesn't need cooking (for example from tins and jars, UHT milk) can be eaten without a cooker. Food with a short cooking time saves fuel.
- **Cooking without power:** A gas hob often keeps working. A tealight food warmer can heat food up, and a fondue set with fuel gel can bring small amounts to the boil. Only use a gas stove indoors if it is approved for indoor use.
- **Outdoors only:** camping stoves with a gas cartridge, gas or charcoal barbecues. Ideally cook on the balcony or terrace, not inside. If you use a device indoors that is only approved for outdoor use, you risk carbon monoxide poisoning – and in Germany it may count as gross negligence if there is damage.
- **Stock fuel** to match your stove (gas cartridges, methylated spirit, fuel gel). Gas does not belong in the cellar.
- The BBK has collected recipes for cooking without power in its "Notfallkochbuch" (emergency cookbook, in German).



Safe cooking and heating: indoors only devices approved for indoor use, such as a food warmer or fondue; barbecue, cartridge camping stove and generator outdoors only – indoors there is a risk of carbon monoxide

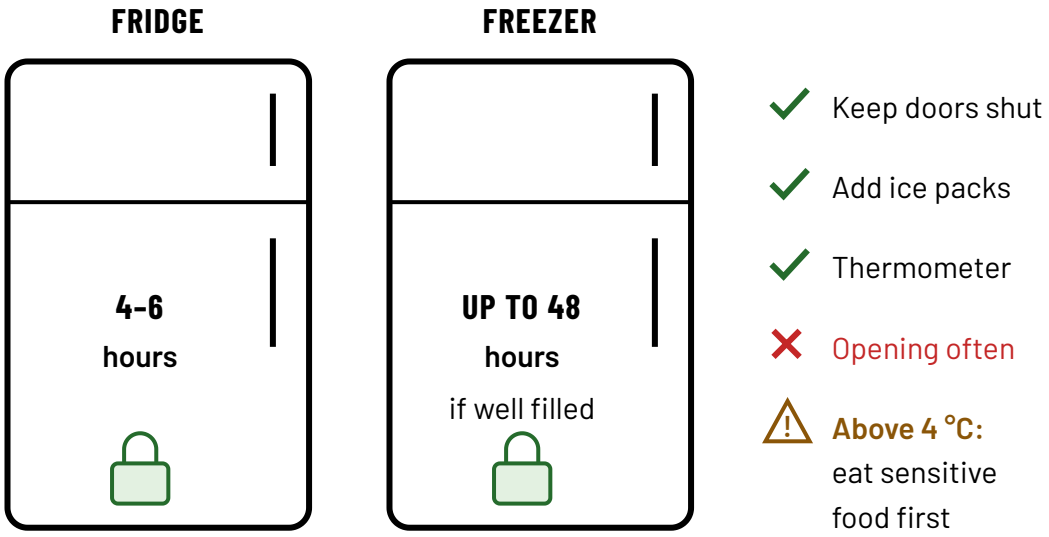
Why carbon monoxide is so dangerous: When there is too little oxygen during burning, carbon monoxide (CO) forms. Carbon monoxide poisoning is life-threatening. So: never run barbecues, cartridge camping stoves or generators in the flat, cellar or garage – outdoors only.

Fridge and freezer

You can't save food forever, but you can buy time:

- **Keep ice packs or frozen bottles of water** in the freezer compartment; during an outage they help keep the fridge cold for longer.
- **A simple fridge thermometer** tells you the temperature when the digital display is off.
- **Well-filled freezers** stay cold for longer.
- Sensitive foods (dairy, meat, fish, egg dishes, ready-made salads) belong at the bottom of the fridge just above the vegetable drawer – that's where it's coldest.

When the power goes off: **keep the door shut.** Above 4 °C, bacteria multiply faster. So eat sensitive foods first, while the fridge is still below 7 °C.



Frozen food up to –12 °C: still safe

Keep fridge and freezer shut: the fridge stays cold for about four to six hours, a well-filled freezer often up to 48 hours; eat sensitive food first while it is below 7 degrees

Water and toilet

- **Drinking water:** 2 litres per person per day, for as many days as you can manage (aim for ten). Plus water for cooking and hygiene.
- While water is still running, you can fill **the bath, buckets and watering cans**.
- **Prepare an emergency toilet:** strong bin bags, cat litter or sawdust, disinfectant. Instructions: Hygiene and emergency toilet.

Cash, car, papers

- **Cash** in small notes and coins.
- **Keep the car's tank full** if you have one – then you can still get around when petrol stations fail. The car radio makes a good emergency radio.
- **Important documents** (ID, insurance, list of numbers) kept handy and protected.

Generating your own power?

A small generator or a battery system can help, but it isn't a must – and there are rules:

- **Never run a generator indoors** – the exhaust fumes can suffocate you. A well-ventilated, dry spot outdoors is suitable. Refuelling and hot parts are a fire risk.
- **Storing fuel:** In Germany, no more than 10 kilograms of petrol or 20 kilograms of diesel may be kept in a cellar, in suitable cans (technical rule TRGS 510).
- **Don't feed into the house wiring without an electrician:** If you want a generator to supply your house or flat's distribution board, get advice from a registered electrical contractor. Work on the house wiring may only be done by electrical contractors. The BBK also recommends informing your grid operator and electricity supplier; in a block of flats, the owners as well.

- **Plan the load:** Anything that makes heat (kettle, fan heater, hotplate) quickly needs 1,500 to 2,000 watts per device. Sensitive devices such as computers or heating controls need a generator with stable voltage and frequency.
- **Neighbours:** Generators are loud; cables through open windows and doors let the heat out and make your home easier to break into.
- **Quiet alternatives:** battery systems with an inverter, or a solar PV system designed for off-grid (island) operation. Here too: changes only by an electrical contractor.

Fire safety

- Keep smoke alarms, a fire extinguisher or a fire blanket ready.
- Gas lights and candles only under supervision, with enough ventilation.

Variations

Flat in a block: On upper floors the water may fail sooner – storing water is especially important here. Lifts and electric door openers stop; think about how older neighbours or those with limited mobility will be looked after. A generator is not an option in a flat.

House: If you have a sewage pump in the cellar, it won't work without power. In hard frost, water pipes can freeze and burst – keep an eye on pipes and heating after the outage. If flooding threatens, switch off the power to rooms at risk and don't enter flooded rooms with electrical installations.

With children: Stock baby food that can be given without heating or warmed with little energy. A child's torch by the bed, a game for the evening in the dark. More: the Children guide.

With pets: Plan a supply of pet food; aquariums and terrariums need power for pumps and heat. More: the Care & pets guide.

With care needs and medical devices: This is the most important point in this section.

- Check early which devices or aids in the household need power continuously (for example a ventilator) and how long their batteries last.
- Clarify **in advance** with your doctor, care service or manufacturer what emergency solutions there are.
- Ask your care service how it will keep working during a longer power cut. Personal alarm services and meals on wheels may also stop.
- If someone lives in a care home, ask about its back-up power plans.
- Plan how you could look after relatives yourself for a while if necessary, and keep a supply of regular medicines.

IN AN EMERGENCY

The first hour

1. **Stay calm and check who is affected.** Look in the fuse box, ask the neighbours, look at the street lights. If only your home is dark, the cause is probably your own installation or a fuse.
2. **Get light** – a torch or head torch, not a candle in the first rush.
3. **Switch on the battery radio.** Local stations give information about the situation, how long it may last and help points. Listen for official announcements.
4. **Switch off devices** that were running when the power went: above all anything that gets hot (cooker, oven, iron, coffee machine, kettle, electric blanket, fan heater), and sensitive devices such as computers and TVs. Leave **one lamp** switched on so you notice when the power is back.
5. **Keep the fridge and freezer closed.**
6. **Don't use lifts.** If someone is stuck in a lift, get help.
7. **Save your phone:** battery saver on, screen dimmer, only make essential calls. A short text – "We're fine" – instead of a long call.

The first few hours

1. **Check on others:** children, older people, neighbours with care needs. Agree who will call the grid operator's fault line – not everyone at once.
2. **Collect water** while it's still running: bath, buckets, watering cans.
3. **Eat chilled food first:** the most perishable things in the fridge get used first – while they are still cold.
4. **Stay at home** unless there's a reason not to. Avoid unnecessary journeys: traffic lights are out, petrol stations aren't working.
5. **In winter, put warm clothes on in good time** – don't wait until you're cold. Set up the warm room.

If it goes on longer

1. **Cook only with suitable devices** – outdoors or on the balcony; indoors only approved devices.
2. **Keep the warm room going:** doors shut, blankets, sleeping bags, huddle together; air briefly but fully at regular intervals.
3. **Set up the emergency toilet** when the flush stops working (Hygiene).
4. **Switch on the radio at set times** to save batteries. Pass on information – not everyone has a radio.
5. **Go to the help point** if you need help or have to make an emergency call and the phone doesn't work. The radio and your local authority will tell you where it is.
6. **Ration supplies:** water, food, batteries, fuel.
7. If possible, stay for a while with relatives or friends who are not affected.

Emergency calls – emergencies only

A power cut on its own is **not an emergency**. Only call 110 or 112 (the German emergency numbers) in a real emergency – during past power cuts the emergency number was often dialled for information, and real emergency calls got through late. If the emergency numbers don't work, go to the nearest police station, hospital or your local help point in an emergency.

Everything you need right now, in brief: Emergency mode: power cut.

EMP AND SOLAR STORMS

When people hear "blackout", some think of an electromagnetic pulse or a huge solar storm. Both are real, but often exaggerated. Here are the essentials, calmly.

Solar storms – the natural event

The Sun regularly has violent eruptions. They can throw a cloud of charged particles into space. If it reaches Earth after about one to two days, it disturbs Earth's magnetic field – a **geomagnetic storm**. This can drive strong currents through very long conductors such as overhead power lines. These currents can damage large transformers and lead to power cuts. The effects are strongest near the poles, but the northern lights can then be seen much further south.

Well-known examples:

- **1859, the "Carrington event":** northern lights almost as far as the equator, severe disruption to telegraphs.
- **13 March 1989, Québec (Canada):** a solar storm overloaded the power grid; around six million people were without power for nine hours, at minus 15 degrees. A transformer was also lost.
- **October 2003:** the regional grid failed in Malmö, Sweden.
- **May 2024:** the strongest storm since 1989, with northern lights much further south than usual – but without significant consequences for the public.

The European Space Agency (ESA) stresses that most solar events have little or no effect on most people's daily lives. Space weather services watch the Sun constantly; before a strong storm, grid operators usually get hours to days of warning.

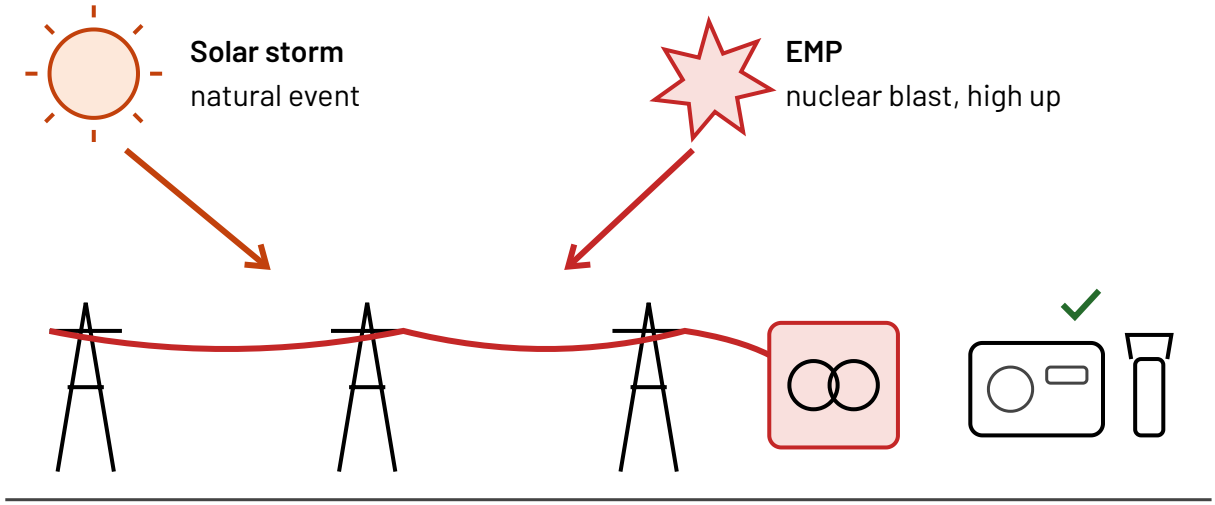
EMP – the weapon effect

In emergency preparedness, an **EMP** (electromagnetic pulse) usually means the pulse from a **nuclear explosion at high altitude**. Depending on the altitude, it can hit a whole region, up to a continent, at once. According to an action plan by the US Department of Energy (2017), it can disrupt electrical and electronic systems in general, but the greatest risk is to **long-line networks** – the power grid and long-distance communication lines. Part of the pulse affects transformers in a similar way to a solar storm. In 1984 the German federal government wrote that it could not be ruled out with certainty that the

German interconnected grid might temporarily split apart, but it expected disruption to stay limited in area and time.

An EMP requires the use of a nuclear weapon. Solar storms, on the other hand, have happened again and again – they are the event to realistically plan for.

What is realistically affected



Most at risk:	grid, long lines, transformers
EMP only:	electronics can be upset too
Less at risk:	small, unplugged devices

For you, that means: a long power cut

EMP and solar storm compared: both mainly hit long lines and large transformers in the power grid; an EMP can also upset electronics; small, unplugged devices without long cables are much less at risk

- **Most at risk:** large power grids, long lines, large transformers. If transformers are damaged, repairs can take time – that is what makes the power cut long.
- **Can also be disrupted:** satellites, GPS positioning, shortwave radio, mobile networks; with an EMP, also electronics and control systems.
- **Less at risk:** small devices without long cables that aren't plugged in – such as a pocket radio or a torch in a drawer. There is no guarantee, but the specialist reports clearly see the main risk in the long lines.

Why the preparation is the same

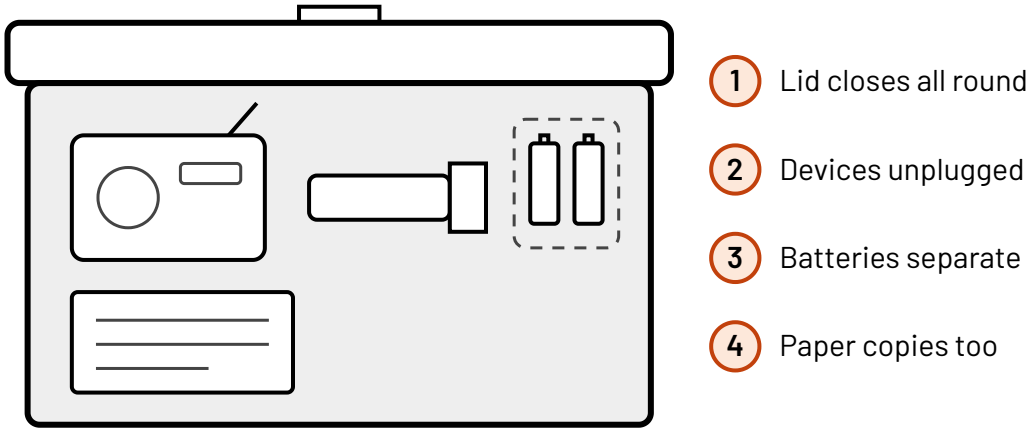
For you at home, the result of an EMP or solar storm would above all be one thing: **a long, widespread power cut** – with everything described in this guide. That's why you need no special equipment. Water, food, light, warmth, a radio, cash and paper lists are the right preparation, whatever the reason the power is off.

A few simple extras

If you like, you can do a little more for very little money:

1. **Get a spare radio and a spare torch** that stay unplugged and unused.
2. **Store the batteries separately** so nothing leaks.
3. Put everything together in a **closed metal box with a lid** (for example a biscuit tin or a metal toolbox). Metal that completely surrounds a device shields it from electromagnetic fields – this principle (a tight metal casing, a "Faraday cage") is used, for example, to protect nuclear power stations. For a household tin, it is **a low-cost precaution, not a promise**.
4. **Paper copies:** phone numbers, meeting points, important documents, a printed map. See Grab bag and the Document folder guide.
5. **Cash** – as for any power cut.

That's all you need. Expensive "EMP protection" products, bunkers or home remedies such as using the microwave as a shielding box are not part of it.



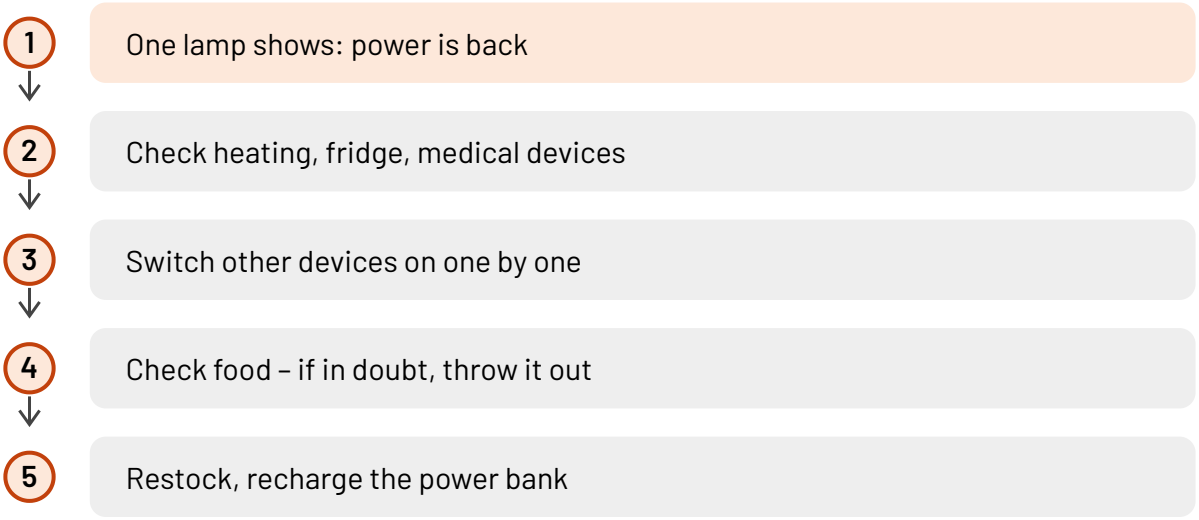
Low-cost precaution – no guarantee

Metal box for spare devices: radio and torch unplugged, batteries kept separately, paper copies included, lid closes all round – a low-cost precaution with no guarantee

AFTERWARDS

Things don't go back to normal the moment the power returns. It can take a while until all systems are running and shops are restocked.

WHEN THE POWER COMES BACK



When the power comes back: a lamp shows power is back, first check heating, fridge and medical devices, then switch devices on one by one, check food, restock supplies

1. **Switch devices back on one by one.** First check that the heating, fridge, freezer and medically necessary devices are working properly. Anything not urgent stays off for now or is switched on later – this avoids load peaks on the grid.
2. **Reset clocks, heating and other devices.**
3. **Keep an eye on pipes and heating,** especially after frost – damage often shows up later. Also check hot water, smoke alarms and any sewage pump.
4. **Check food:**
    - Frozen food that warmed from –18 °C to no more than –12 °C is safe to eat, according to the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR).
    - Use thawed cooked dishes and raw plant foods soon. Cook raw animal products all the way through after thawing.
    - Throw away ice cream that has started to thaw.
    - Anything that was unchilled for a long time or looks or smells spoiled: throw it out. If in doubt, throw it out.
5. **Keep listening to the radio:** there may still be notices about drinking water, traffic and supplies.
6. **Stay frugal:** food, medicines, cash and fuel may be short for a while yet.
7. **Document damage** (photos of broken devices or spoiled food) – it helps with insurance or warranty claims.
8. **Restock:** batteries, gas cartridges, water, cash; recharge the power bank.
9. **Learn from it:** What was missing, what was unnecessary? Write it down and add it to the supplies calculator or the shopping list.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Barbecuing, cooking on a camping stove or running a generator – in the flat, cellar or garage.** Danger to life from carbon monoxide.
- **Leaving candles burning unattended.**
- **Opening the fridge and freezer "just for a second"**, again and again.
- **Calling the emergency number for information.** It blocks the line for real emergencies.
- **Leaving the cooker, iron and fan heater switched on** – they come back on when the power returns.
- **Connecting a generator to the house wiring yourself.** Only an electrical contractor may do that.
- **Relying only on your phone.** No network means no warning app and no internet radio.
- **Waiting until you're cold before wrapping up.**
- **Driving around to see "what it's like elsewhere".** Traffic lights are out, fuel is short.
- **Using the lift** while the power supply is uncertain.
- **Buying expensive special products for EMP** instead of water, light and a radio.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Torches or head torches with spare batteries, kept in a fixed place
- [ ] Battery, solar or wind-up radio with spare batteries
- [ ] Power bank, charged, with cable
- [ ] List of important phone numbers on paper
- [ ] Drinking water: 2 litres per person per day (aim: ten days)
- [ ] Food that needs neither fridge nor cooking
- [ ] Camping stove (for outdoors) or food warmer/fondue (for indoors) and fuel
- [ ] Warm clothes, blankets, sleeping bags
- [ ] Cash in small notes
- [ ] Smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarm
- [ ] Fire extinguisher or fire blanket
- [ ] Bin bags and cat litter for the emergency toilet
- [ ] Ice packs in the freezer, fridge thermometer
- [ ] Location of the fuse box and the grid operator's fault number noted
- [ ] Know where your nearest help point ("lighthouse") is
- [ ] Medical devices: emergency solution agreed with doctor or care service
- [ ] Personal medicines, baby food, pet food
- [ ] Spare radio and torch unplugged in a metal box, batteries kept separately

- [ ] Important documents and meeting points on paper

SOURCES

All links checked on 5 November 2026. Most sources are in German.

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CHAPTER 2

STORING AND TREATING DRINKING WATER

How much water you need, how to store and rotate it, how to boil or treat it safely – and what applies during a boil-water notice or after a flood.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

DO NOW

1. Switch on the radio or a warning app, watch for notices from your water supplier
2. Boil-water notice – bring water to a rolling boil once, let it cool for at least 10 minutes
3. Use your supply for drinking and cooking first, save on washing
4. If a longer cut-off is looming – fill the bath, buckets and pots for the toilet and washing
5. Never drink floodwater – not even boiled, filtered or treated with tablets

A person can survive for perhaps three weeks without food, but only about four days without fluids. That is why water comes first in your supplies – and why it pays to know a few simple steps before the water ever stops or becomes contaminated.

AT A GLANCE

- **2 litres per person per day:** 1.5 litres for drinking, 0.5 litres for cooking. For ten days that is **20 litres per person** – but even a three-day supply helps a lot.
- **Bottled water** is the easiest supply: store it somewhere cool and dark, use it up by the best-before date and buy more.
- **For washing and the toilet** you need extra non-drinking water on top – it does not have to be drinking water (bath, buckets, containers).
- **Boil-water notice:** bring water to a rolling boil once and let it cool for at least 10 minutes – also for brushing teeth, baby formula, ice cubes and washing fruit and vegetables.
- **Floodwater, fuel, chemicals:** such water cannot be made drinkable by boiling, filters or tablets. Use only your stored or bottled water.

START SMALL

You don't have to carry 20 litres per person into the cellar today. Every day of supplies counts, and three days is a good first step. Pick one of these small tasks each day – none takes longer than ten minutes, and most cost nothing:

- **One extra pack of water** with your next shop, put it in the cellar, storeroom or a cupboard. Best add it to your shopping list straight away.
- **Write the date on it:** write the best-before date in big letters on the pack with a thick marker – then you can see it without tearing the film open. You can enter it in your supplies and get a reminder.
- **Find the main stop tap:** where do you turn off the water in your flat or house? Go and look once, check that it turns, and note the location under Home.
- **Set aside a large pot with a lid** for boiling water – and think about how you would cook safely without electricity (see Power cut).
- **Note down your water supplier:** write the name, website and phone number of your local utility or water board on paper – they announce disruptions and boil-water notices.
- **Set up warnings:** install a warning app (for example NINA) and check whether there is a battery or wind-up radio in the house → Warnings.
- **A filter or disinfection tablets:** put them on your wish list and compare calmly what they can do – not in the middle of an emergency. Overview under Equipment.

UNDERSTANDING

Tap water in Germany is very good and almost always available. That is exactly why people rarely think about what happens when it doesn't come. Knowing the reasons helps – then you also know which preparations help in which situation.

Why the water can fail

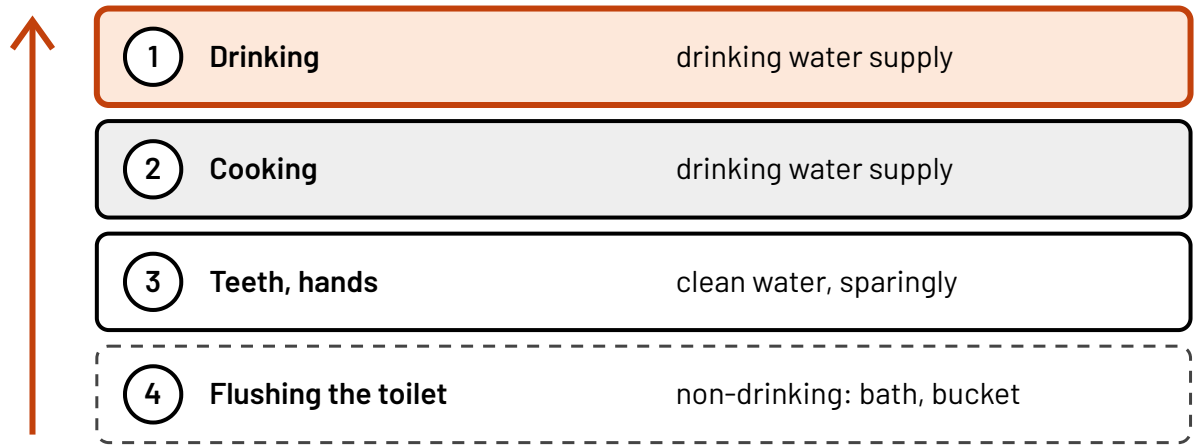
1. **Power cut:** waterworks need electricity and digital systems. If these fail, the water supply can fail too. According to the BBK, how quickly that happens depends on local conditions and on how high up you live – on upper floors the pressure may go sooner. In hard frost without heating, water pipes can also freeze and burst.
2. **Damaged pipes:** an accident, extreme weather or sabotage can damage the lines for electricity, water, gas or mobile networks.
3. **Contamination in the network:** if there are signs that germs – for example from faeces – have got into the drinking water, or if illnesses pile up, the local health authority considers a **boil-water notice** (Abkochgebot). It orders that tap water must be boiled before drinking.
4. **Floods:** floodwater often carries oil from flooded heating-oil tanks, contaminated sludge and faeces. Dirty water is a breeding ground for disease, and floods can also disrupt the water supply itself. Contamination can reach groundwater and private wells.

Drinking water and non-drinking water

Not all water in a household has to be of drinking quality. What matters is the order of priority when it runs short: drinking comes first, then cooking, then the bare essentials of hygiene – and only last

flushing the toilet. For the toilet and cleaning, non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket is enough. The BBK explicitly calls drinking water "more important than food".

PRIORITIES: WHAT COMES FIRST



Running low: cut back from the bottom

Order of priority for water use: 1. drinking and 2. cooking from the drinking water supply, 3. teeth and hands with clean water, sparingly, 4. flushing the toilet with non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket. When it runs low, cut back from the bottom first.

Who decides – and how you find out

- **The local health authority** (Gesundheitsamt) orders a boil-water notice and also lifts it. Only it may do so.
- **The water supplier** (local utility, water board) informs households, together with the local media. The notice usually says which area is affected and gives a phone number or website for questions.
- **Warning channels:** most information comes via warning apps and radio, plus loudspeaker vans and digital information boards, and in special situations sirens and mobile phone alerts. In a power cut or without a mobile network many of these channels don't work – but a battery, wind-up or car radio does. More under Warnings.
- **Pass it on:** the template notices of the German Environment Agency (UBA) explicitly ask you to tell housemates and neighbours, so the message reaches everyone.

Not every notice means the same thing. In its templates for consumer information, the UBA distinguishes several levels:

NOTICE	WHAT IT MEANS
Additional chlorination	Water can be used without restriction; it may taste or smell slightly different. Possibly not suitable for aquariums.

NOTICE	WHAT IT MEANS
Boil-water notice	Drink tap water only after boiling, and boil it for food, brushing teeth and wounds. Toilet flushing without restriction.
Do not drink, do not cook	Boiling is not enough. Showering, bathing, washing and the toilet are fine.
Do not use at all	Boiling is not enough, no showering or washing either. Only toilet flushing is fine. Keep taps closed.
All-clear	Water can be used normally again – sometimes with the advice to let it run first.

A boil-water notice is usually a **bridge for a few days** until disinfection, flushing of the network or another supply takes effect. For major emergencies, the federal government has also created more than 5,200 emergency drinking water wells and springs, mostly in residential areas of large cities; they are planned to supply 15 litres per person per day. Whether and how such water may be used is decided by the health authority. Your own supply is still the first help for the first few days.

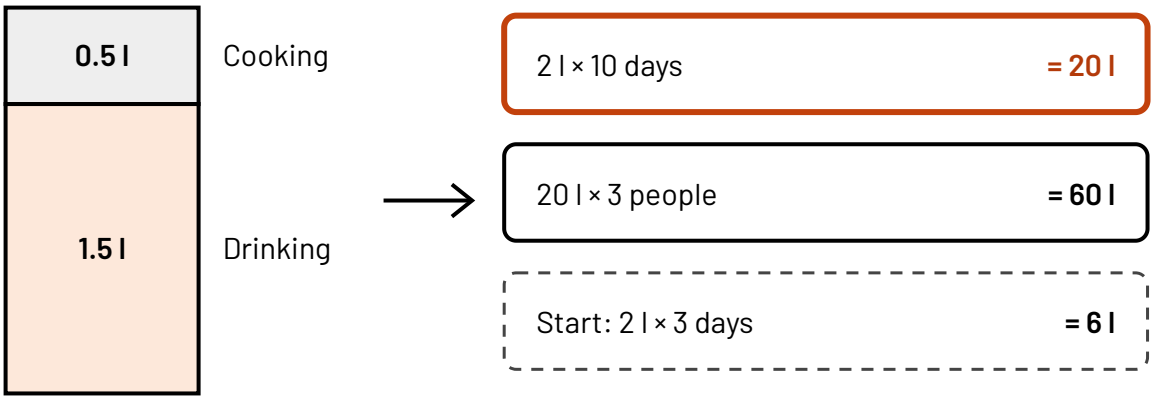
Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Essen und Trinken bevorraten", BBK "Stromausfall" (2026), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), BBK "Wassersicherstellung", UBA recommendation on §§ 62–68 TrinkwV (2/2026), CDC "Reentering Your Flooded Home" (8/2026).

PREPARING

How much water?

The BBK recommends being able to look after yourself for **ten days** if possible – but a supply for **three days** already helps a lot, and you can build on it step by step. Per person and day, the BBK ideally reckons with **2 litres**: an adult needs at least 1.5 litres of fluid, plus 0.5 litres of water for cooking. Part of your supply should be (mineral) water; fruit juices and other drinks count too.

2 LITRES PER PERSON PER DAY



More in heat, illness, pregnancy · pets extra

Washing and toilet: extra non-drinking water

Calculation for your water supply: 1.5 litres for drinking plus 0.5 litres for cooking make 2 litres per person per day; times 10 days is 20 litres per person, 60 litres for 3 people; to start with, 3 days with 6 litres per person is enough.

HOUSEHOLD	3 DAYS	5 DAYS	10 DAYS
1 person	6 l	10 l	20 l
2 people	12 l	20 l	40 l
3 people	18 l	30 l	60 l
4 people	24 l	40 l	80 l

The supplies calculator works it out exactly for your household.

Plan for more in hot weather and during physical exertion, for pregnant women, for people who are ill and for pets. The 2 litres only cover drinking and cooking – water for washing and the toilet comes **on top**.

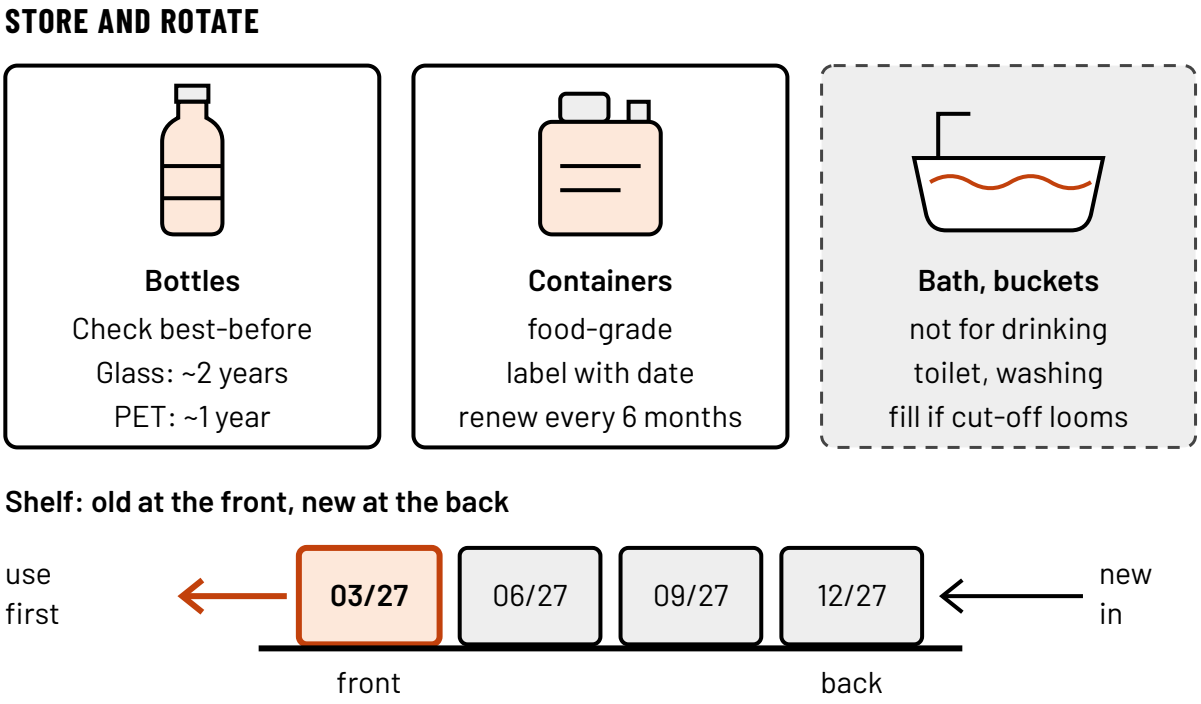
Bottled water: the easiest supply

For reasons of food hygiene, the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (portal Ernährungsvorsorge) advises storing **bottled water from the shop** for your emergency supply – preferably in glass, otherwise in PET bottles. The reason: bottled water has a best-before date, so you know when to replace it.

- **Shelf life:** mineral water in its original sealed bottle keeps almost indefinitely in principle. Manufacturers usually give a best-before date of two years for glass bottles and one year for PET bottles. You can usually use unopened, well-stored bottles considerably longer.

- **Where to store it:** dark, cool, dry. Sun and heat reduce the quality.
- **PET bottles** are better suited to short- to medium-term storage: they can absorb odours from their surroundings and are slightly permeable to gases. In blazing sun or in a car, a substance from the plastic can also pass into the water and change its taste. So: not in the car, not by the window, not next to petrol or pesticides.
- **Glass bottles** are particularly suitable for longer storage, but heavy – handy for a cellar or ground floor.

Rotate instead of throwing away: the BBK recommends a simple cycle – build up a supply once, check the dates regularly (for example once a year on a fixed date), drink bottles that will soon expire in everyday life and replace what you use straight away. On the shelf that means: **old at the front, new at the back.** You push new packs to the back and drink from the front. A good fixed date is the nationwide warning day in September.



Three ways of storing water: bottles with a best-before date, glass about 2 years, PET about 1 year; food-grade containers labelled with a date, refilled every 6 months; bath and buckets only for non-drinking water. Below, a shelf: take the oldest packs from the front first, put new ones at the back. Store everything cool, dark and away from petrol.

Filling tap water yourself

According to the Ernährungsvorsorge portal, there is **no general statement** about the shelf life, suitable containers and water quality of tap water you fill yourself – hence its recommendation for bottled water. If you still want to store tap water, for example because you can't carry much, follow these rules from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

1. **Use food-grade containers** meant for drinking water. Never containers that have held chemicals such as bleach or pesticides. Without a food-grade container: sturdy, unbreakable (not glass) and with a tight-fitting lid.
2. **Clean it first:** wash the container with washing-up liquid and sanitise it, then let it air-dry and fill it.
3. **Label it:** write "drinking water" and the date you filled it.
4. **Store it properly:** cool, out of the sun and away from toxic substances such as petrol or pesticides.
5. **Replace every 6 months:** pour out water you filled yourself (for example on the plants), clean the container, refill it, new date.

Empty, clean containers are handy anyway: for filling up when a cut-off is announced, and for holding non-drinking water.

Non-drinking water for the toilet and washing

Non-drinking water is water you don't drink – for flushing the toilet, cleaning and basic washing. In its checklist the BBK lists separate **water containers for fire-fighting or non-drinking water**. In an older edition of its guide (2018), the BBK recommends: if a longer disruption of the water supply is looming, fill **every larger container available** – bathtub, washbasins, buckets, pans, water containers – and remember the water for **flushing the toilet**.

You can make non-drinking water last longer with disinfection products; it's best to ask for advice in a camping or outdoor shop (BBK). To need less non-drinking water, a small hygiene supply helps: wet wipes and disinfecting wipes, dry shampoo or hand-cleaning paste, disposable crockery, kitchen roll, household gloves, bin bags and, if needed, a camping toilet with replacement fluid or bags. How to build an emergency toilet is explained in the guide Hygiene and emergency toilet.

Equipment for treating water

You don't need expensive gear. You probably already have the most important things:

- **A large pot with a lid** or a kettle – according to the UBA, a kettle is well suited to boiling water, but it needs electricity.
- **Cooking without electricity:** a gas hob often keeps working. A gas cooker may only be used indoors if it is approved for indoor use. Camping stoves with gas cartridges and gas or charcoal barbecues belong **outdoors only** – indoors there is a risk of life-threatening carbon monoxide poisoning. The BBK advises tested carbon monoxide alarms. More in the guide Power cut.
- **Clean cloths or coffee filters** for pre-filtering cloudy water.
- **Clean containers with lids** for boiled water.

A **water filter** or **disinfection tablets** can be an addition, for example if you cannot boil water. What matters is knowing what they do – and what they don't:

WHAT WORKS AGAINST WHAT?

	Bacteria	Parasites	Viruses	Chemicals
Boiling	✓	✓	✓	✗
Filter ≤ 0.3 µm	✓	✓	✗	✗
Chlorine dioxide tabs	✓	○	✓	✗
Silver alone	○	✗	✗	✗

✓ works ○ partly, long contact time ✗ no, or not shown

Table of what works against what: boiling works against bacteria, parasites and viruses, not against chemicals. A filter with a pore size of 0.3 micrometres or less holds back bacteria and parasites, but not viruses or chemicals. Chlorine dioxide tablets work against bacteria and viruses, against parasites only partly and with contact time, not against chemicals. Silver alone works only partly against bacteria, and not, or not proven, against parasites, viruses and chemicals.

- **Boiling** kills all types of germs – bacteria, viruses and parasites. It is the best and simplest method (CDC, WHO).
- **Portable filters** do not remove viruses. To hold back bacteria, a filter needs an absolute pore size of **0.3 micron or smaller**, for parasites **1 micron or smaller** – this is stated on the pack. Only reverse osmosis filters also remove viruses. So after filtering you should also disinfect the water (CDC).
- **Disinfection tablets:** chlorine and iodine tablets kill most germs, but not the parasite *Cryptosporidium*. **Chlorine dioxide tablets** also work against it if you follow the instructions exactly. Dose and contact time are on the pack (CDC).
- **Silver:** products containing only silver are **not a disinfectant** for contaminated water. The WHO reviewed silver in 2018: it works only against some bacteria and needs long contact times; its effect against viruses and parasites is not proven. The WHO does not recommend silver as a disinfectant for drinking water. So check on the pack whether a product *disinfects* water or only *keeps it fresh*.
- **Against chemicals, fuel and toxins** none of these methods helps – neither boiling nor disinfecting nor filtering (CDC).

You'll find filters and tablets under Equipment; if you want some, add them to your shopping list.

Variations for your household

- **Flat on an upper floor:** here the water pressure may go sooner in a power cut. Keep your supply where you can reach it without a lift – bottles spread across cupboards or under the bed work

too.

- **House with a cellar:** glass bottles and crates fit well in a cool, dark cellar – but not in one that floods during high water or heavy rain. Then better one floor up. See Floods.
- **Your own well:** if it is in a flood-prone area, have the water tested after flooding before you use it (CDC).
- **With babies:** for healthy infants, tap water can in principle be suitable for preparing food. It is boiled and cooled to about 30 to 40 °C; you should not use water filters for this, as they can be contaminated with germs. If the tap water is temporarily contaminated, still water labelled "suitable for preparing infant food" (Geeignet für die Zubereitung von Säuglingsnahrung) is an alternative (Verbraucherzentrale consumer advice centre). A few bottles of it belong in your supply. During water advisories the CDC also advises using ready-to-feed formula if possible.
- **With pets:** plan their water on top (BBK, CDC). How much depends on the animal – simply measure for a few days how much disappears from the bowl.
- **With care needs or illness:** people who are ill often need more water (CDC). For people with weakened immunity, further rules may apply during a boil-water notice – ask the treating doctor (UBA). Food and water for assistance animals belong in your supply (BBK).

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Essen und Trinken bevorraten", BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK guide English edition (12/2018), BLE Ernährungsvorsorge (FAQ; storing mineral water), Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen (9/2026), CDC (2024, 2025, 2026), WHO (2018), UBA (2/2026).

IN AN EMERGENCY

When the water gets weaker or stops

1. **Get informed:** switch on the radio or a warning app, check the water supplier's website or fault line. Official advice comes first.
2. **Fill up while it still runs:** if a longer disruption is looming, fill the bath, washbasins, buckets, pots and containers – above all for flushing the toilet (BBK 2018). As long as there is no boil-water notice, you can fill clean bottles and containers with tap water as extra drinking water.
3. **Ration your supply:** drinking water first for drinking, then for cooking. Use the non-drinking water for hygiene and the toilet (see the "Priorities" figure above).
4. **Save water:** disposable crockery instead of washing up, wet and disinfecting wipes for your hands, dry shampoo, kitchen roll instead of a wet cloth. When the toilet no longer flushes: emergency toilet, see Hygiene.
5. **In frost:** without heating, pipes can freeze and burst (BBK). If a pipe bursts, turn off the water at the main stop tap.
6. **Think of your neighbours:** pass on what you've heard and ask who needs help – especially older people on upper floors.

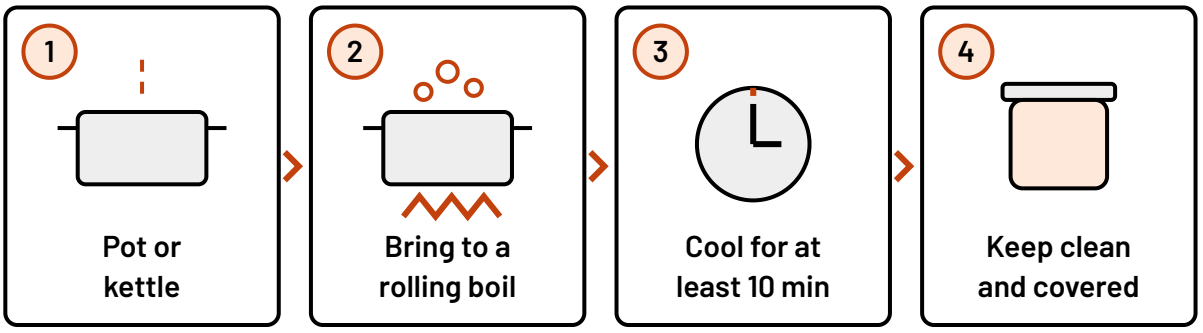
7. **Use the emergency supply:** if the authorities hand out water or open emergency wells, listen out for radio and loudspeaker announcements. Take clean containers with you.

During a boil-water notice – step by step

This is how it is set out in the UBA's template notices, which health authorities and water suppliers use. If your local notice says something different, follow the local one.

1. **Read the notice carefully:** which area? Which phone number or website for questions? Switch on the radio and listen for loudspeaker announcements. Tell your neighbours.
2. **Drink tap water only after boiling it.**
3. **Boil it properly:** bring the water **to a rolling boil once** and then let it cool slowly for **at least 10 minutes**. A kettle is handy for this. For most uses, then wait until the water is only lukewarm.
4. **Use boiled or bottled water for:** drinking and drinks, preparing food, washing and preparing fruit, vegetables and other uncooked food, ice cubes, brushing teeth and cleaning open wounds.
5. **Small children, people who are ill and people with weakened immunity:** also use boiled and cooled water for personal hygiene.
6. **What works without boiling** (according to the UBA, as an exception for a short time, with a slightly higher risk): a dishwasher that can be set to 60 °C or dries with heat; a washing machine at 40 °C or more; personal hygiene and cleaning – cover open wounds with waterproof plasters; washing hands thoroughly with plenty of soap. You can use **toilet flushing** without restriction.
7. **When showering**, make sure not to swallow any water (CDC).
8. **Appliances connected to the water supply**, such as water dispensers or ice makers in the fridge, should not be used during the advisory (CDC).
9. **Pets** get bottled or boiled, cooled water (CDC).
10. **Filters** do not replace boiling: filtered tap water is also boiled during the advisory (CDC). Do not use water filters for baby formula (Verbraucherzentrale).
11. **Careful, hot!** Risk of scalding – children, older and ill people in particular often don't notice high temperatures (UBA).

BOILING IN 4 STEPS



Cartridge camping stove: outdoors only

Water from other sources: 1 minute rolling boil

Boiling in four steps: 1. fill a pot or kettle with water, 2. bring to a rolling boil, 3. let it cool for at least 10 minutes, 4. keep it clean and covered. Use cartridge camping stoves outdoors only; boil water from other sources at a rolling boil for 1 minute.

BOIL NOTICE: WHICH WATER FOR WHAT?

Boiled or bottled only	Tap water is fine
○ Drinking and drinks	✓ Flushing the toilet
○ Cooking, baby formula	✓ Showering, don't swallow
○ Washing fruit and veg	✓ Dishwasher at 60 °C+
○ Brushing teeth	✓ Washing machine 40 °C+
○ Ice cubes	✓ Hands: plenty of soap
○ Cleaning open wounds	
○ Water for pets	

Small children, the ill: boiled for washing too

Bring to a rolling boil once, cool 10 min

During a boil-water notice, drinking, cooking and baby formula, washing fruit and vegetables, brushing teeth, ice cubes, cleaning wounds and water for pets need boiled or bottled water. Tap water is fine for the toilet, for showering without swallowing, for a dishwasher at 60 degrees or more, a washing machine at 40 degrees or more and for washing hands thoroughly with soap. For small children and people who are ill, boil water for personal hygiene too.

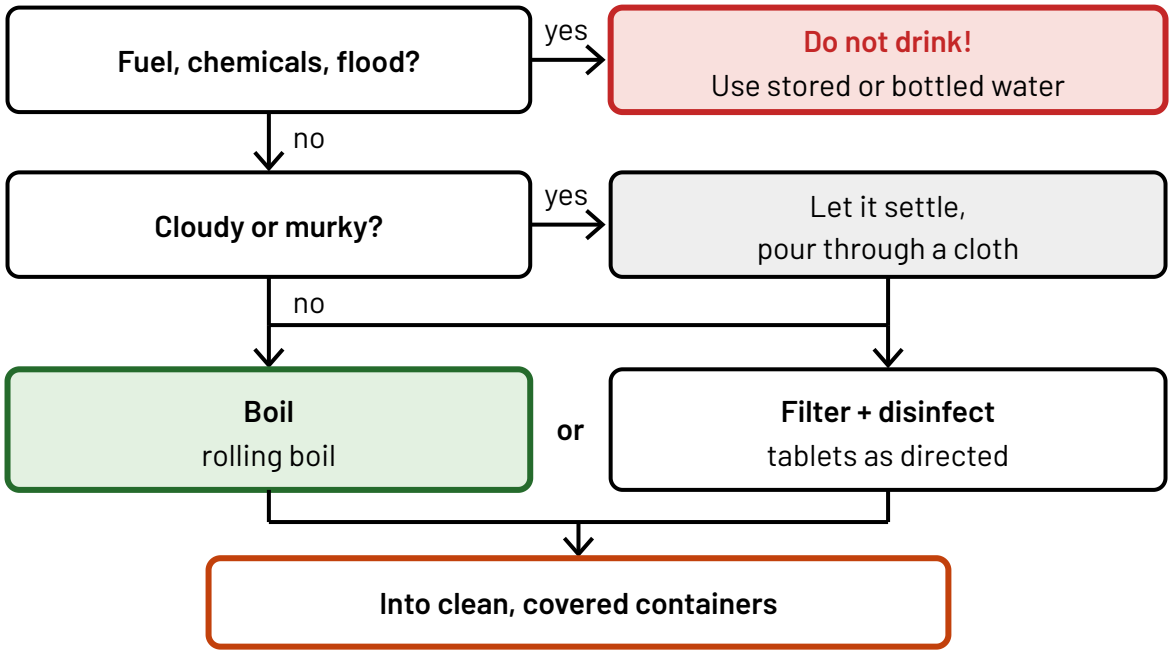
If the notice says "do not drink": then boiling is not enough. Use your supply or bottled water – for drinking, cooking, brushing teeth and wounds. Whether you may shower is stated in the notice.

Treating water from other sources

The safest option is always your supply or bottled water. If you do have to use water whose quality you don't know – for example leftover water from containers of unknown age – proceed like this (following the CDC):

1. **Check whether it can be used at all:** does the water smell or look like oil, petrol or chemicals, or does it come from floodwater? Then **do not use it** – no treatment will make it safe.
2. **Prepare cloudy water:** let it settle and pour off the clear water at the top, or pour it through a clean cloth, paper towel or coffee filter.
3. **Boil:** bring the clear water to a **rolling boil for 1 minute** (above about 2,000 metres altitude, 3 minutes), then let it cool. According to the WHO, a rolling boil is enough to inactivate disease-causing bacteria, viruses and protozoa.
4. **If you cannot boil:** filter with a suitable filter and **then** disinfect with tablets according to the pack instructions.
5. **Store:** in clean containers with tight-fitting lids.

UNSAFE WATER: THE PATH



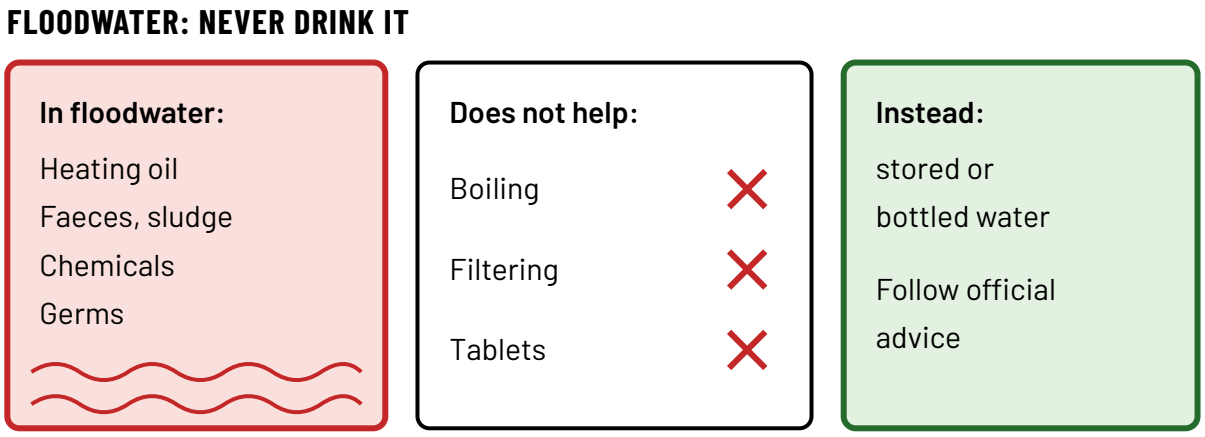
Decision path for unsafe water: if there is fuel, chemicals or floodwater, do not drink it but use stored or bottled water. If the water is cloudy, first let it settle and pour it through a cloth. Then boil it or, if that is not possible, filter it and disinfect it with tablets. Finally, pour it into clean containers with lids.

Floodwater: never drink it

Floodwater is almost always contaminated: with heating oil, sludge, faeces, chemicals and germs (BBK). Water containing harmful chemicals or toxins cannot be made safe **by boiling, disinfecting or filtering** (CDC). Even a good outdoor filter won't help here.

- Do not drink floodwater, and do not use it for brushing teeth, cooking, washing up, ice cubes or baby formula.
- Whether **tap water** is safe after a flood is for the local authorities to say. Until then, use your supply or bottled water (CDC).
- If oil or another hazardous substance is leaking, call the fire brigade immediately (BBK).

More on what to do before, during and after a flood is in the guide Floods. Which supplies can be eaten cold or need little water is in the guide Building up food supplies.



Tap water after a flood: wait for the all-clear

Floodwater contains heating oil, faeces, sludge, chemicals and germs. Boiling, filtering and tablets do not help. Instead, use stored or bottled water and follow official advice; after a flood, only use tap water once the all-clear has been given.

In emergency mode you'll find the most important steps under Emergency.

Sources for this section: UBA recommendation on §§ 62–68 TrinkwV, annexes A.3 and A.4 (2/2026), BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK "Stromausfall" (2026), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), BBK guide English edition (12/2018), CDC (2024, 2025, 2026), WHO (2015), Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen (9/2026).

AFTERWARDS

When the boil-water notice is lifted

- **Only the health authority lifts it** – not a neighbour, not a social media post. Before that, it must be shown that the water reliably meets the requirements again; in practice the cause must have been removed and samples must be flawless on **three consecutive days** (UBA).
- **Read the all-clear:** sometimes the water can be used normally straight away. If the all-clear says there may still be residual water in the pipes, let the water **run until it comes out of the tap cold, colourless, clear and odourless**. If anything remains unusual, tell your water supplier (UBA).
- **Pass it on:** tell housemates and neighbours about the all-clear too.

Restocking

1. Use up opened bottles first.
2. Buy new packs to replace what you drank and put them at the **back** of the shelf, write the date on them, enter them in your supplies.
3. Empty containers you filled yourself, clean them and refill them – with a new date.
4. Use up the non-drinking water from the bath and buckets for the toilet and cleaning, then clean the containers and let them dry.
5. Add whatever was missing (tablets, containers, disposable crockery, wet wipes) to your shopping list.

Learning from it

After a few days, sit down briefly with everyone in the household: did the water last? Did everyone know where the supply is and where the main stop tap is? Did cooking without electricity work? Did the warning arrive in time? Improving one thing is enough – for example getting a second container or keeping the radio within reach.

Sources for this section: UBA recommendation on §§ 62–68 TrinkwV, annexes A.3 and A.4 (2/2026), BBK "Essen und Trinken bevorraten", CDC "Emergency Water Supply" (6/2025).

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Thinking only about drinking:** without non-drinking water for the toilet and hands, hygiene quickly suffers.
- **Forgetting containers for years:** replace water you filled yourself every 6 months.
- **Storing PET bottles in the sun, in the car or next to petrol:** the water takes on smells and tastes.
- **Thinking only about drinking during a boil-water notice:** brushing teeth, ice cubes, washing fruit and vegetables and baby formula also need boiled water.
- **Only warming it briefly:** the water must come to a proper rolling boil once.
- **Treating a filter as a cure-all:** portable filters do not hold back viruses or chemicals.
- **Using silver tablets for dirty water:** silver alone does not disinfect reliably.
- **Boiling floodwater:** neither boiling nor filtering helps against oil and chemicals.
- **Camping stove in the flat:** cartridge stoves and barbecues outdoors only – carbon monoxide is life-threatening.
- **Ending the boil-water notice yourself:** only the health authority lifts it.
- **Leaving hot water unattended:** children scald themselves easily.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Drinking water for at least 3 days: 2 litres per person per day
- [ ] Goal of 10 days: 20 litres per person
- [ ] Extra water planned for pets, hot weather and illness
- [ ] Best-before date clearly visible on every pack, entered in your supplies
- [ ] Shelf sorted: old at the front, new at the back
- [ ] Storage place cool, dark, away from petrol and chemicals
- [ ] Self-filled containers food-grade, labelled, dated (replace every 6 months)
- [ ] Empty clean containers or buckets for non-drinking water
- [ ] Large pot with a lid
- [ ] Safe way to cook without electricity (camping stove outdoors only)
- [ ] Clean cloths or coffee filters for pre-filtering
- [ ] If wanted: filter with a suitable pore size and chlorine dioxide tablets
- [ ] With a baby: still water labelled "suitable for preparing infant food"
- [ ] Hygiene supply: wet wipes, disinfecting wipes, disposable crockery, bin bags
- [ ] Main stop tap found, location noted
- [ ] Name, website and phone number of your water supplier on paper
- [ ] Warning app installed, battery or wind-up radio
- [ ] Yearly date for checking (for example the warning day in September)

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CHAPTER 3

BUILDING UP FOOD SUPPLIES

How much food belongs in a ten-day supply, how to build it up step by step and keep it rotating without waste – and how to eat well without electricity.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

A food supply is not a bunker full of emergency rations – it is a slightly fuller cupboard of things you eat anyway. It helps during a power cut, in severe weather, when someone suddenly falls ill or when the shelves in the shop stay empty for a while. The goal: ten days of meals – **without a fridge** and ideally **without much cooking**.

AT A GLANCE

- **Ten days is the goal, three days a good start.** The BBK (Germany's Federal Office of Civil Protection) recommends being able to look after yourself for ten days if possible; even a three-day supply helps a lot, and you can build on it step by step.
- **About 14.5 kg of food per person for ten days** makes an example supply of roughly 2,200 kcal a day – spread across cereals, vegetables, fruit, dairy, protein and fat. The supplies calculator works it out for your household.
- **Start small:** add one or two extra items every time you shop. It's easier on your wallet, and not everything reaches its date at the same time.
- **Eat what you store, store what you eat.** New items go to the back, older ones get used first – so the supply stays fresh and nothing ends up in the bin.
- **Without electricity:** most of your supply should taste fine cold. Camping stoves with gas cartridges and barbecues belong outdoors only – indoors there is a risk of deadly carbon monoxide poisoning.

START SMALL

Nobody has to fill a trolley with ten days of food on a Saturday. Pick one of these small tasks each day – none takes longer than ten minutes, and most cost nothing:

- **See what's already there:** go through your cupboards, cellar and pantry and jot down roughly what you have – pasta, rice, tins, jars. You can enter it in your supplies and see what's missing. There is often more than you think.
- **Buy one extra thing:** next time you shop, pick up one or two extra packs of pasta or a tin of beans. Add it to your shopping list straight away.
- **Rearrange one shelf:** sort one shelf by the rule "old at the front, new at the back". Whatever runs out first goes in front.

- **Check your tin opener:** do you have one that works without electricity? One also belongs in your emergency bag.
- **Try a meal without the stove:** eat cold tonight – bread, bean salad from a tin, nuts, fruit from a jar. You'll find out what you like and what's missing.
- **Sort out the cooking question:** how would you heat something up without electricity? A gas hob, a tea-light warmer, a stove for outdoors? What is safe is explained below and in the Power cut guide.
- **Set a check date:** once a year, on a fixed date, go through your supply – for example on Germany's nationwide warning day in September. Put it in your calendar.

UNDERSTANDING

Why a supply helps

A supply can help in many situations: a sudden power cut, extreme weather, sudden illness, or when the supermarket shelves stay empty (BBK). Usually it is not about a huge disaster but about a few days when shopping is difficult or impossible.

The order matters: a person can survive for perhaps three weeks without food, but only about four days without fluids. So drinking water comes first – how much you need and how to store it is in the Drinking water guide. This guide is about food.

What makes good food for your supply

The BBK lists four points that help when putting your supply together:

1. **Long-lasting:** food that doesn't need refrigeration won't spoil during a power cut.
2. **Ready to eat:** food that doesn't need cooking can be eaten even when the stove no longer works.
3. **Short cooking time:** food that cooks with little energy makes the fuel for a camping stove or barbecue last longer.
4. **Suitable:** who is the supply for? Are there allergies or eating habits? Do children or pets need to be fed too?

There is a fifth point that Germany's Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (BLE) stresses: a supply only makes sense if it is used regularly. So store what you like to eat. Unfamiliar special food often sits there until it has expired.

Two ways: set up once or keep it rotating

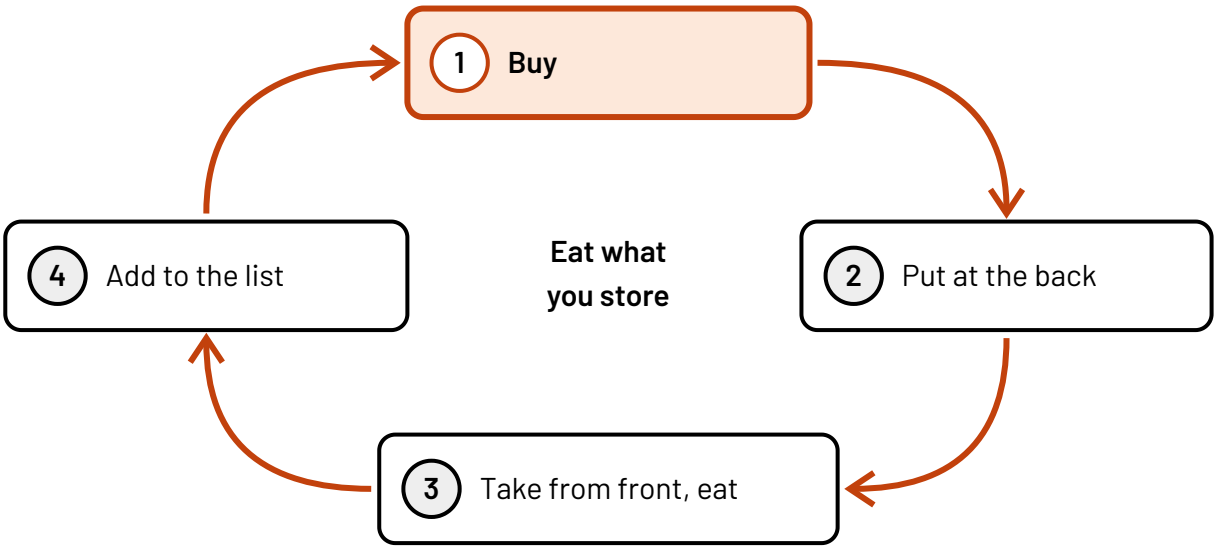
The BBK describes two ways to manage a supply:

- **One-off supply:** you set up the supply once and leave it. Then you need to check the dates regularly – for example once a year on a fixed date – and replace anything that has expired or been used in good time.

- **Rotating supply:** you use the supplies in everyday life, preferring whatever expires first. What you use, you buy again on your next shopping trip.

For most households, rotating is easier: the supply stays fresh, nothing gets thrown away, and you don't have to remember a special shelf. Your supply is then simply a bit more of what's in the cupboard anyway.

THE SUPPLY CYCLE



The oldest gets eaten first – nothing expires

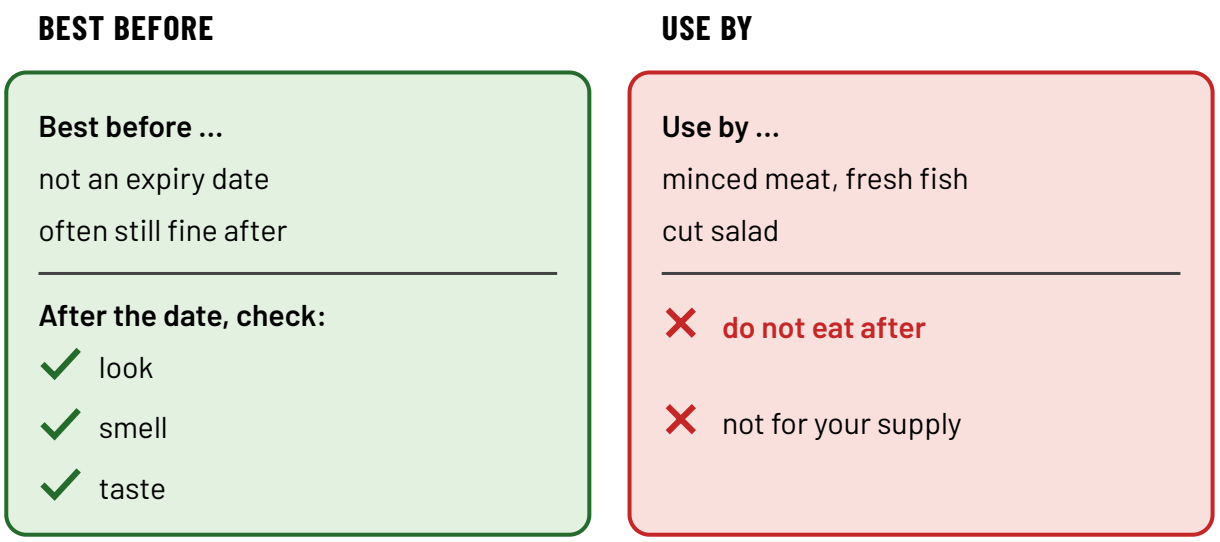
The supply cycle in four steps: 1. buy, 2. put it at the back, 3. take from the front and eat, 4. write what you used on the shopping list – then buy again.

Best-before date and use-by date

Packaged food carries one of two dates – and they mean different things (Verbraucherzentrale, Germany's consumer advice centres):

- **"Best before …":** up to this date the manufacturer guarantees that the **unopened** food keeps its properties, such as smell, taste and nutritional value, if stored correctly. A best-before date is **not an expiry date**. Much food is still fine afterwards. Use your senses: look, smell, taste. Mould, an unpleasant smell, a sour taste or a tingling on the tongue are signs it has to go. Once opened, the best-before date no longer applies.
- **"Use by …":** this appears on highly perishable food such as minced meat, fresh fish, cut salad or cut fruit. After this date it may no longer be sold, and the Verbraucherzentrale advises against eating it. Such food is not suitable for your supply anyway.

Some foods don't need a best-before date at all, for example sugar, salt and vinegar. If something has no date, write the **purchase date** on it (BLE).



Two dates compared: best before means look, smell and taste after the date – often still fine. Use by appears on minced meat and fresh fish and means do not eat after the date.

What harms your supplies

Long-life food keeps for a long time – but only if it is stored properly. The four enemies are **heat, moisture, light and pests**:

- **Heat:** tins, dry goods and cooking oil are best stored at no more than 20 °C (BLE). Next to the cooker, dishwasher or window, temperature and humidity fluctuate (Verbraucherzentrale).
- **Moisture:** tins must be kept dry so they don't rust or get damaged (Verbraucherzentrale). According to the BLE, "dry" means no more than 70 % relative humidity.
- **Light:** cooking oil, preserves in jars and dried fruit should be kept in the dark (BLE).
- **Pests** such as mites, flour beetles, larder beetles, ants, flies, cockroaches, rats and mice can sometimes even get through packaging. The longer something sits, the greater the risk of infestation (BLE).

Here, too, rotation helps: what gets used regularly doesn't sit long enough to spoil.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Stocking up food and drink", BLE Ernährungsvorsorge ("General recommendations", "Looking after your food supply", "How food can be stored", "Pests"), Verbraucherzentrale "Best-before is not the same as use-by" (10/2025), "Tinned food" (12/2025), "Dry foods" (12/2025).

PREPARING

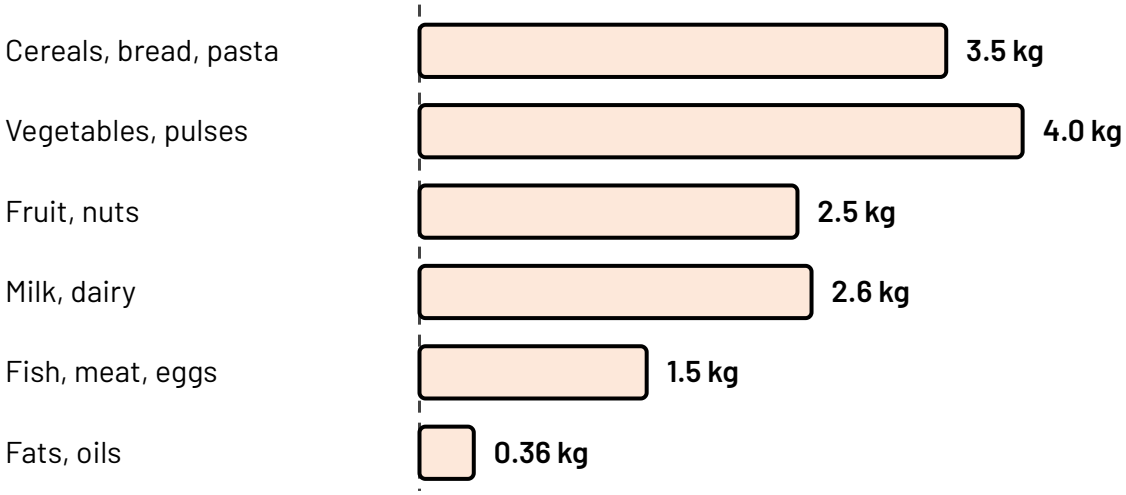
How much? Quantities for ten days

In its guide, the BBK published an example supply for **one adult for ten days**. It corresponds to about **2,200 kcal a day** and so generally covers total energy needs. The Bereitsein supplies calculator is based on these figures:

GROUP	AMOUNT PER PERSON, 10 DAYS	EXAMPLES
Cereals, bread, potatoes, pasta, rice	3.5 kg	Crispbread, rusks, pasta, rice, oats, instant mashed potato
Vegetables, pulses	4.0 kg	Peas, beans, lentils, sweetcorn, red cabbage in tins or jars
Fruit, nuts	2.5 kg	Tinned fruit, dried fruit, nuts
Milk, dairy products	2.6 kg	UHT milk, milk powder, hard cheese
Fish, meat, eggs	1.5 kg	Tuna, tinned meat, whole egg powder
Fats, oils	0.36 kg	Rapeseed oil, olive oil

That adds up to about **14.5 kg per person**. Drinks come on top: 20 litres per person for ten days, see Drinking water.

PER PERSON, 10 DAYS



Total approx. 14.5 kg · approx. 2,200 kcal a day

Plus 20 litres of drinking water per person

Bars show the example supply per person for ten days: vegetables and pulses 4.0 kg, cereals, bread and pasta 3.5 kg, milk and dairy 2.6 kg, fruit and nuts 2.5 kg, fish, meat and eggs 1.5 kg, fats and oils 0.36 kg; together about 2,200 kcal a day.

Here is what that looks like for different periods and households (simply scaled):

GROUP	1 PERSON, 3 DAYS	1 PERSON, 10 DAYS	2 PEOPLE, 10 DAYS
Cereals, bread, pasta, rice	approx. 1.1 kg	3.5 kg	7.0 kg
Vegetables, pulses	1.2 kg	4.0 kg	8.0 kg
Fruit, nuts	approx. 0.8 kg	2.5 kg	5.0 kg
Milk, dairy products	approx. 0.8 kg	2.6 kg	5.2 kg
Fish, meat, eggs	approx. 0.5 kg	1.5 kg	3.0 kg
Fats, oils	approx. 0.1 kg	0.36 kg	approx. 0.7 kg

A few notes:

- **These are examples, not rules.** The BLE's current example table is split slightly differently – about 3.3 kg of cereals and potatoes, 2.5 kg of dairy and 1.2 kg of eggs, meat and fish, plus fresh fruit and onions. Both come to about 2,200 kcal a day. A few hundred grams either way don't matter; what matters is that you eat the food.
- **Vegetables and pulses in tins or jars are already cooked.** Dried products such as lentils need extra water and energy (BBK).
- **Fruit** is best stored tinned or in jars; as fresh fruit, only use varieties that keep (BBK).
- **Fresh eggs** only keep for a limited time, whereas whole egg powder keeps for several years (BBK).
- **Age, activity and dietary needs** change what you need (BLE). The supplies calculator roughly counts children aged 4 to 12 as three quarters and toddlers as half of an adult's amount; babies need their own food.

Add "other foods" to taste, which the BLE lists explicitly: sugar, sweetener, honey, jam, chocolate, iodised salt, ready meals (for example ravioli, dried tortellini, instant soups), dried potato products, flour, instant stock, cocoa powder, hard biscuits and pretzel sticks. Coffee and tea are in the table too. Familiar food and something comforting belong in good supplies – especially in a stressful situation.

Vegetarian: the BLE has its own vegetarian table. Instead of meat, sausage and fish it lists, for example, tofu, vegetarian burgers and spreads, and eggs; chickpeas, lentils or lupins also work as pulses. You can switch the supplies calculator to "vegetarian".

Building up gradually

The BBK advises: **always pick up something extra every time you shop** – for example one or two more packs of pasta. That way your supply grows almost by itself, without spending a lot of money at once. In the long run a supply can even save money, because you can make use of special offers (BLE).

A good approach is to think in stages, as the BBK checklist does: first three days, then five, then seven, then ten. Every stage is already a gain.



A staircase with four steps: 3 days, 5 days, 7 days, 10 days. Below it: one or two extra items every time you shop.

This is how building up can look:

1. **Week 1 – the basics:** pasta, rice, oats, crispbread or rusks. You'll definitely eat them, and they keep for a long time.
2. **Week 2 – vegetables and pulses:** beans, peas, lentils, sweetcorn, red cabbage in tins or jars. They are already cooked and can be eaten cold.
3. **Week 3 – protein and dairy:** tuna, tinned meat or fish, chickpeas, UHT milk or milk powder.
4. **Week 4 – fruit, fat and other foods:** tinned fruit, dried fruit, nuts, a bottle of oil, honey, chocolate, instant soups.

Then use the supplies calculator to see what's still missing and fill the gaps. Only buy amounts that match your needs – long storage times increase the risk of pests (BLE).

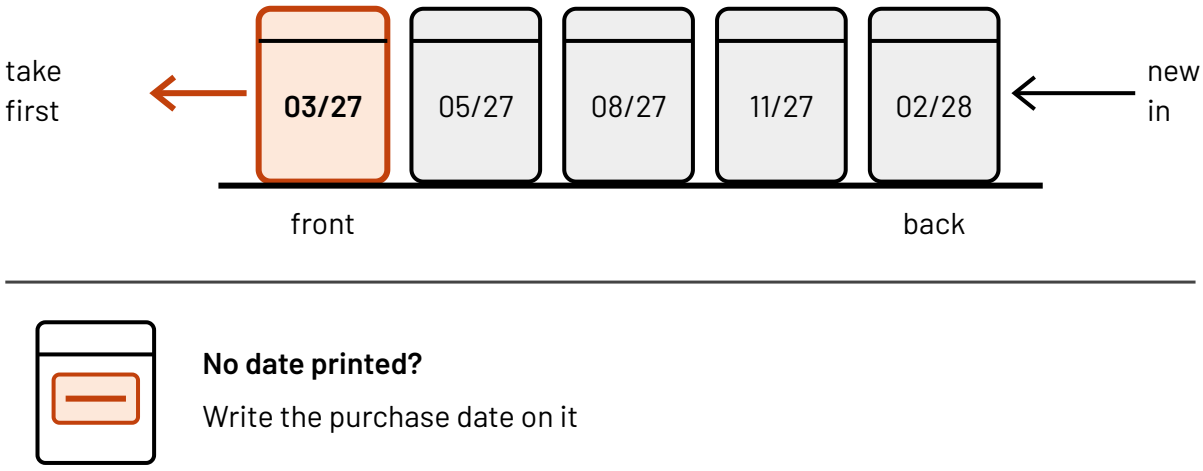
Rotation in everyday life

To keep your supply fresh, all you need are a few fixed habits (BLE):

1. **Put new items at the back or bottom**, use older ones first. On the shelf that means: **old at the front, new at the back.**
2. **Keep a stock list:** it saves rummaging through cupboards and freezers. Add new items, cross out what you've used. You can do this on paper or in the app's supplies, which can also remind you of approaching dates.
3. **Check best-before dates regularly** and use food in good time. Whatever runs out soon goes on this week's menu.

4. **No date? Note the purchase date.** Label home-made preserves or frozen food with contents, amount and date.
5. **Replace what you use straight away:** whatever you take from the supply goes straight onto the shopping list.

OLD AT THE FRONT, NEW AT THE BACK



A shelf with five tins sorted by date: take the oldest tin at the front first, put new ones in at the back. If no date is printed, write the purchase date on it.

A practical tip: write the date in big letters with a thick marker on the top of tins and packs. Then you can see it when you open the cupboard door, without turning every tin over.

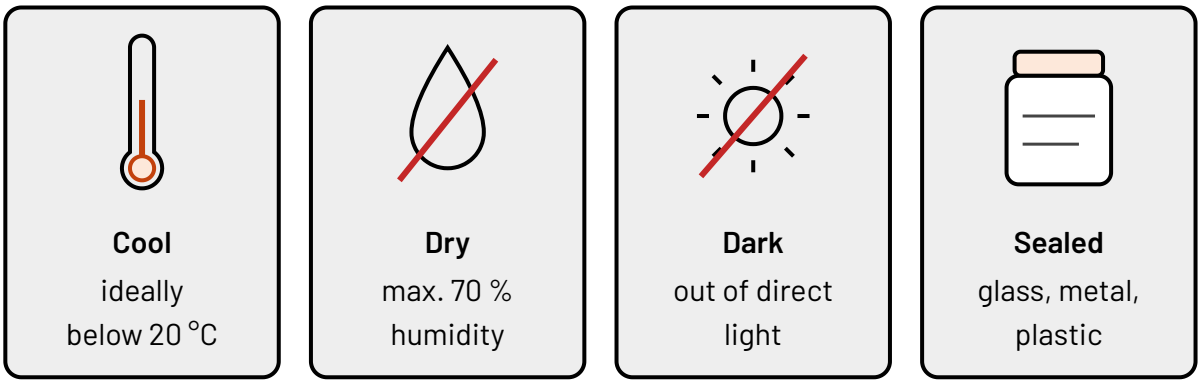
Storing it properly

The best place is a food cupboard or pantry: dark, ventilated, 15 to 20 °C and no more than 70 % humidity (BLE). Dry goods don't belong next to the cooker, dishwasher or window, where temperature and humidity fluctuate, or next to strong-smelling things such as spices, coffee or detergent (Verbraucherzentrale).

A cellar, at 4 to 12 °C and 85 to 90 % humidity, is ideal for potatoes, apples and root vegetables – but often too damp for dry goods (BLE). Unopened tins can be kept at cellar temperature below 19 °C, but must be stored **dry** so the tins don't rust or get damaged (Verbraucherzentrale).

Containers: dry goods such as flour, rice, pasta, semolina and flakes are best transferred into tightly closing tins or screw-top jars. Containers made of glass, metal or plastic with a tight lid protect against pests (BLE, Verbraucherzentrale).

HOW YOUR SUPPLY KEEPS



✕ Not next to cooker, dishwasher, window

⚠ Cellar: often too damp for dry goods

Four rules for storage: cool, ideally below 20 degrees; dry, no more than 70 percent humidity; dark, out of direct light; tightly sealed in glass, metal or plastic. Not next to the cooker, dishwasher or window.

How long does what keep? The BLE gives these guide values for good storage – the printed best-before date applies as well:

FOOD	STORAGE	GUIDE VALUE
Tinned vegetables	dry, airy, ideally below 20 °C	1–2 years
Tinned fruit, jam	dry, airy, ideally below 20 °C	1 year
Tinned fish and meat	dry, airy, ideally below 20 °C	several years
Pasta, rice, semolina, flakes	dry, tightly sealed	1 year
Dried potato products	dry, ideally below 20 °C	1–2 years
Dried fruit, dried vegetables	dark, airy, in jars or tins	1 year
Crispbread, rusks	dry	1 year
Cooking oil, unopened	dark, up to 20 °C	6–12 months
Cooking oil, opened	dark, up to 20 °C	4–8 weeks
Sugar, salt, tea	dry	almost unlimited

The Verbraucherzentrale adds: undamaged, unopened tins are often still edible **years after the best-before date**. White rice and dried pasta (except wholegrain, egg and vegetable pasta) often keep for

several years beyond the best-before date. Dried pulses keep for about one to two years. Oats, quinoa, millet and amaranth, on the other hand, go rancid more quickly because of their fat content – so rotate these fairly fast. **Hard cheese** is in the example table but belongs in the fridge (BLE); eat it early in a power cut.

Against pests (BLE):

- Only buy undamaged packs and check new supplies for infestation.
- Keep the storage area clean and tidy, ventilate well, take rubbish out of the house quickly.
- Fly screens on windows keep insects out.
- Check stored food regularly. Webs, contamination or clumping are signs of infestation – don't eat such products (Verbraucherzentrale).
- Leave chemical pest control indoors to professionals.

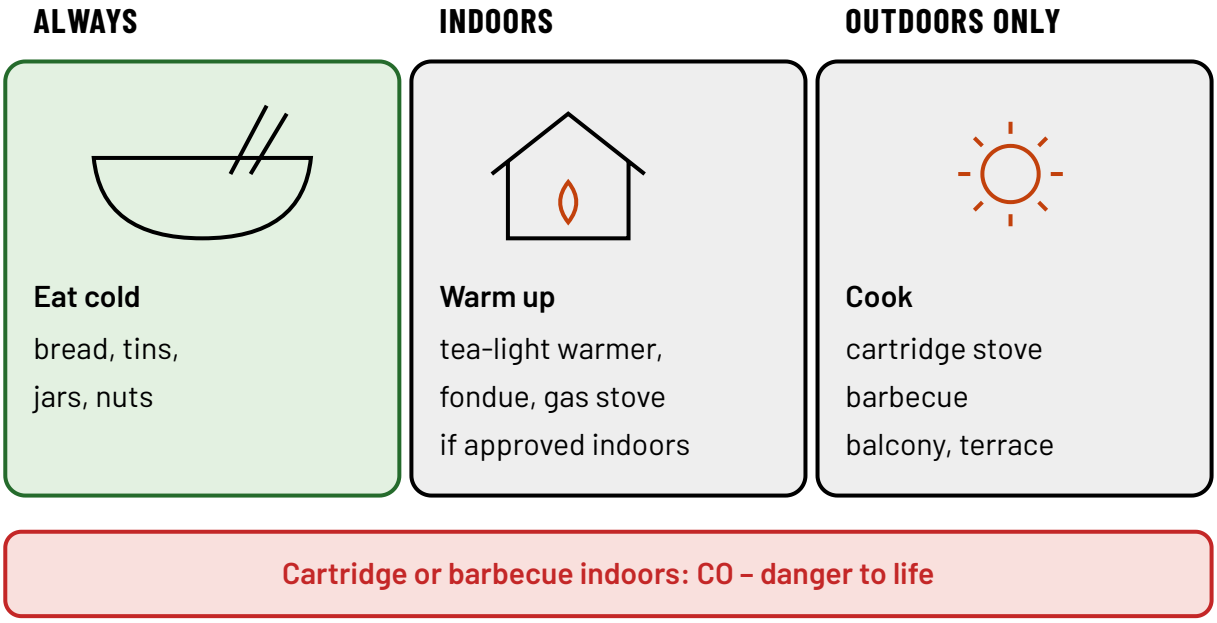
Preparing to cook without electricity

In a power cut, electric cookers, ovens and kettles don't work. A gas hob can often still be used (BBK). So the best preparation is a supply that **also tastes fine cold** for the most part (BBK, BLE). For hot meals there are three levels:

1. **Warming up indoors:** a tea-light warmer can heat food, such as an instant soup. A fondue set with fuel paste can bring small amounts to the boil. A gas stove may only be used indoors if it is **approved for indoor use** (BBK).
2. **Cooking outdoors:** use camping stoves with gas cartridges and gas or charcoal barbecues **outdoors only** (BBK) – ideally on a balcony or terrace, not in the flat. Only use appliances you are familiar with (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).
3. **Fuel to match:** gas cartridges, methylated spirits, wood, briquettes or charcoal – depending on the appliance (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).

Important: if there isn't enough oxygen during combustion, **carbon monoxide** is produced. Carbon monoxide poisoning is life-threatening. The BBK recommends tested and approved **carbon monoxide alarms**. Everything else about light, warmth and power is covered in detail in the Power cut guide.

Saving fuel: foods with short cooking times such as cereal flakes, couscous, bulgur or split pulses, and one-pot dishes, need little energy (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen). Cook with a lid and only put as much water in the pot as you need (Verbraucherzentrale NRW).



Three levels without electricity: eating cold always works, for example bread, tins and jars. Warm up indoors only with a tea-light warmer, fondue set or a gas stove approved for indoor use. Camping stoves with cartridges and barbecues outdoors only, on a balcony or terrace. Below, the warning: a cartridge stove or barbecue indoors means danger to life from carbon monoxide.

Fridge and freezer

Don't rely on the freezer for your supply: if the power goes, it will eventually thaw. That is why the BLE deliberately leaves frozen food out of its example supply. What's in the fridge and freezer is still a good start for the first days – as long as you keep the doors closed. How long the appliances stay cold and what you can do beforehand (ice packs, thermometer) is in the Power cut guide.

Variations for your household

Flat or house

- **Small flat:** think about which rooms you have available for storage (BLE) – a food cupboard, a spare cupboard shelf, a shelf in the storeroom. A supply doesn't have to be in one place. What matters is dry, dark and not too warm.
- **No balcony:** without outdoor space you can only warm food indoors with approved appliances. Then your supply should rely even more on food that tastes good cold.
- **House with a cellar:** good for potatoes, apples, tins in crates – but only if the cellar is dry. Keep dry goods one floor up. In flood-prone areas, don't put anything important on the cellar floor, see Flooding.
- **Garage:** the BLE mentions a shelf in the garage as a possible storage place. Make sure it doesn't get too hot there in summer or damp in winter.

With children and babies

- **Children:** store mainly what they know and like – eating habits and preferences should explicitly be taken into account when putting a supply together (BLE). Something sweet or a favourite snack helps.
- **Babies** need their own food (BBK). Plant drinks such as oat, almond, soy or rice drinks are **no substitute** for infant formula, and bottle feeds should not be made at home from animal milk (Verbraucherzentrale).
- **Prepare baby milk fresh:** always make up bottle feeds fresh before feeding and throw away leftovers immediately. The water is boiled and cooled to 30 to 40 °C (Verbraucherzentrale). So you need water and a way to heat it. Which water is suitable for infant formula is in the Drinking water guide.
- For babies, the supplies calculator adds baby food, water, nappies and bottles to the equipment list. More in the Children guide.

With pets

- Plan food for the whole period – the BLE mentions a supply of **tinned pet food**, the BBK checklist a **food supply for pets**. Use the food your animal knows and rotate it the same way as your own.
- Remember **water** for your animals (BBK) – see Drinking water.
- For **assistance animals**, enough animal food and water belong in the supply (BBK).
- Medicines, cat litter and a carrier are on the supplies calculator's equipment list. More in the Care and pets guide.

With care needs, special diets or allergies

- **Think of special diets:** the BBK explicitly mentions food for people with diabetes, people with allergies and babies. The BLE reminds you to consider dietary needs. If someone needs a special diet, build up a specific supply of it – it may not be available in the shops during a crisis.
- **Allergies:** if there are allergies in the household, your supply must suit them (BBK).
- **Medicines:** anyone who needs medicines regularly should have a supply for **at least ten days** – keeping an eye on shelf life and storage (BBK).
- **Care at home:** personal alarm services, home care and meals on wheels may be limited during a longer power cut, see Power cut and Care and pets. A small supply of food that needs no cooking and is easy to eat helps a lot then.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Stocking up food and drink", BBK guide English edition (12/2018), BLE Ernährungsvorsorge (example table, vegetarian table, other foods, general recommendations, storage, looking after your supply, pests), Verbraucherzentrale (tinned food 12/2025, dry foods 12/2025, baby food 8/2024), Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen (8/2026), Verbraucherzentrale NRW.

IN AN EMERGENCY

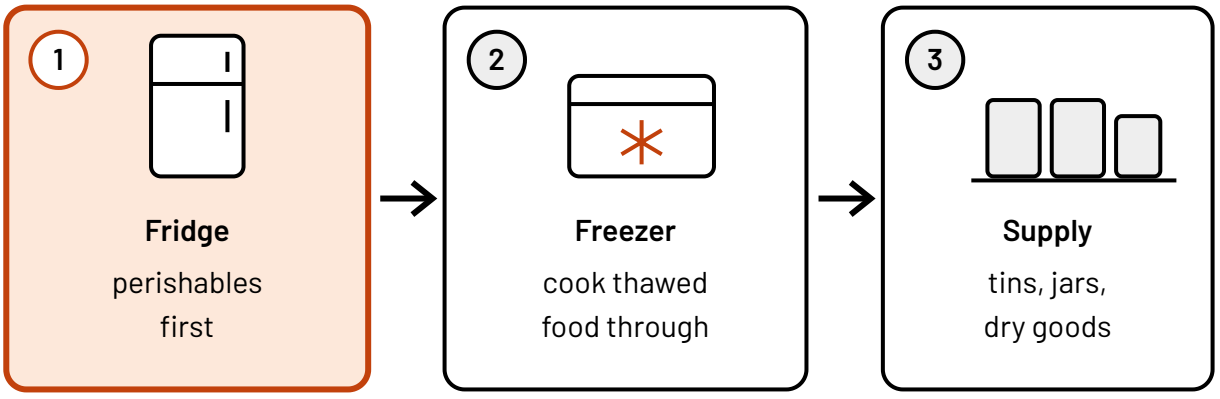
The right order for eating

If the cooling fails, eat the chilled food before your long-life supply (BLE). That way you use what would otherwise spoil and save your supply for later:

1. **The fridge first:** perishable food such as dairy products, meat, fish, egg dishes and ready-made salads – quickly, while the fridge is still below 7 °C (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).
2. **Then the freezer:** with the door closed, a well-filled freezer often holds its temperature for up to 48 hours. Use thawed food soon, cook raw animal products thoroughly (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).
3. **Your supply last:** tins, jars and dry goods keep even without electricity.

Open the fridge and freezer as rarely as possible – ideally decide beforehand what you want to take out.

WHAT TO EAT FIRST?



Keep the doors shut – open as rarely as possible

Order of eating without electricity: 1. fridge, perishables first, 2. freezer, cook thawed food through, 3. supply of tins, jars and dry goods. Keep the doors closed.

A day without the stove

Without electricity, cold dishes are the basis. Combine dairy, cooked food and tins with fruit, vegetables, bread, nuts or flakes – that makes salads, muesli, wraps or sandwiches (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen). An example day from your supply:

- **Breakfast:** oats with UHT milk and dried fruit.
- **Lunch:** crispbread or wholegrain bread with tuna or a spread, with gherkins or beetroot from a jar.
- **Dinner:** salad of tinned beans, sweetcorn and chickpeas, dressed with oil and salt.
- **In between:** nuts, fruit from a jar, rusks, a piece of chocolate.

A DAY WITHOUT THE STOVE

Breakfast	Oats, UHT milk, dried fruit
Lunch	Crispbread, tuna, beetroot
Dinner	Tinned bean salad, oil
In between	Nuts, fruit from a jar, rusks

✓ All eaten cold – saves fuel

Example day without cooking: breakfast oats with UHT milk and dried fruit, lunch crispbread with tuna and vegetables from a jar, dinner bean salad from a tin with oil, in between nuts, fruit from a jar and rusks.

Feel free to try a day like this in everyday life. Then you know what's missing – and the children already know it.

Heating food safely – step by step

1. **Check what works:** does the gas hob still work? Then it's the simplest solution (BBK).
2. **Indoors, only approved appliances:** a tea-light warmer for heating up, a fondue set with fuel paste for small amounts, a gas stove only if it is approved for indoor use (BBK).
3. **Cook outdoors:** set up camping stoves with cartridges or barbecues outdoors only – on a balcony or terrace, not in the flat, cellar or garage (BBK, Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).
4. **Cook economically:** lid on, only as much water as needed, short cooking times, one pot for everything (Verbraucherzentrale NRW, Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).
5. **Ration your fuel:** count how many cartridges or how much charcoal you have and plan hot meals accordingly. Eating cold saves fuel for hot water.
6. **Switch off heat sources** that run on electricity (cooker, oven) so nothing catches fire when the power comes back (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).

More about carbon monoxide, light and warmth is in the Power cut guide.

Making your supply last

- **Opened food first:** eat opened tins straight away or put the rest into a lidded container suitable for food – glass, stainless steel or plastic (Verbraucherzentrale).
- **If in doubt, don't eat it:** never eat from blown tins – with the base or lid bulging outwards (BLE). Throw away tins that are badly dented, bulging or swollen (Verbraucherzentrale). Remove

anything mouldy from the supply immediately. Throw away anything that looks, smells or tastes unusual. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) likewise advise throwing away bulging, open or damaged tins.

- **Hygiene when eating:** without running water, disposable crockery, wet wipes and kitchen roll help. More in the Hygiene guide.
- **Think of your neighbours:** who has no supply, who can't go shopping? The BBK considers it sensible to buy things together with others and share them – see Neighbourhood.

In emergency mode you'll find the most important steps under Emergency.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BLE Ernährungsvorsorge ("Looking after your food supply"), Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen (8/2026), Verbraucherzentrale "Tinned food" (12/2025), Verbraucherzentrale NRW, CDC "Keep Food Safe After a Disaster or Emergency" (11/2025).

AFTERWARDS

Checking chilled and frozen food

When the power is back, first look at what's in the fridge and freezer:

- According to Germany's Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR), frozen food that warmed from -18 °C to no more than -12 °C is still considered safe (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen).
- Use thawed cooked dishes and raw plant foods soon. Cook raw animal products thoroughly after thawing – this also applies to frozen vegetables, berries and sprouts. Throw away thawed ice cream.
- **If in doubt, throw it out:** when you can no longer tell the temperature or how long it lasted, or when appearance, smell or taste are unusual.

More in the Power cut guide.

Restocking

1. **Use up opened food**, leftovers from the fridge first.
2. **Write down what's been used:** everything that was missing or ran out goes on the shopping list.
3. **Restock gradually** – just like building up: a few items each time you shop.
4. **Put them at the back**, write the date on them, enter them in your supplies.
5. **Replace fuel:** empty cartridges, fuel paste, tea lights.

Learning from it

After a few days, sit down briefly with everyone in the household: what tasted good, what did nobody want to eat? Was the tin opener missing? Did cooking without electricity work? What should have lasted longer? Improving one thing is enough – for example storing more of what everyone liked and dropping what nobody did.

Sources for this section: Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen (8/2026), BLE Ernährungsvorsorge ("Looking after your food supply").

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Buying everything at once:** expensive, and then everything expires at the same time. Better one or two extra items each time you shop.
- **Storing things nobody eats:** your supply should consist of what you like to eat.
- **Only food that needs cooking:** without electricity you need food that also works cold.
- **Forgetting the supply:** without rotation or a fixed check date, everything quietly expires.
- **Confusing best-before and use-by:** much food is still fine after the best-before date – not after the use-by date.
- **Open packs in the cupboard:** pests get in easily. Transfer dry goods into tightly closing containers.
- **Dry goods in a damp cellar or next to the cooker:** moisture and heat spoil them.
- **Relying on the freezer:** without electricity it thaws.
- **Forgetting the tin opener:** without a manual opener the tin stays shut.
- **Camping stove or barbecue indoors:** carbon monoxide is life-threatening – outdoors only.
- **Opening and eating blown tins:** a bulging lid or base means: throw it away.
- **Forgetting the baby, pet or special diet:** infant formula, pet food and diet foods may not be available everywhere in a crisis.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Food for at least 3 days, goal 10 days
- [ ] Cereals, bread, pasta, rice: 3.5 kg per person
- [ ] Vegetables, pulses: 4.0 kg per person
- [ ] Fruit, nuts: 2.5 kg per person
- [ ] Milk, dairy products: 2.6 kg per person
- [ ] Fish, meat, eggs or vegetarian alternatives: 1.5 kg per person
- [ ] Fats, oils: 0.36 kg per person
- [ ] Other foods to taste: sugar, salt, honey, coffee, tea, chocolate
- [ ] Most of the supply can be eaten cold
- [ ] Drinking water: 2 litres per person per day (see Drinking water guide)
- [ ] Manual tin opener
- [ ] Shelf sorted: old at the front, new at the back
- [ ] Date clearly visible on every pack, purchase date if none is printed

- [ ] Stock list on paper or in the app's supplies
- [ ] Storage place cool, dry, dark; dry goods in tight containers
- [ ] A way to cook without electricity (cartridge stoves and barbecues outdoors only)
- [ ] Fuel: cartridges, fuel paste or tea lights
- [ ] Carbon monoxide alarm
- [ ] Infant formula if there is a baby in the household
- [ ] Food and water for pets
- [ ] Diet or allergy-friendly food as needed
- [ ] Medicines for at least 10 days
- [ ] Yearly check date (for example Germany's warning day in September)

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All links checked on 5 November 2026.

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CHAPTER 4

PACKING AN EMERGENCY BAG (GO-BAG)

What goes in the backpack when you have to leave quickly, how to pack it so it carries well – with a children's backpack, a document pouch and a twice-yearly check.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

The emergency bag is meant for the moment when you have to leave your home **quickly**: a fire in the building or the neighbourhood, a gas leak, a flood, an evacuation. There is no time then to pack calmly as you would for a holiday. One ready-packed backpack per person gets you through the first days – until you are with friends, relatives or in an emergency shelter and can go back home.

AT A GLANCE

- **One backpack per person**, children included. A backpack is better than a suitcase because both hands stay free. The BBK advises: for each family member, take no more than fits into one backpack.
- **For the first two to three days:** food for two days, a full water bottle, warm and weatherproof clothing, medication, first aid supplies, a torch, a radio, a charged power bank, a document folder and cash.
- **Only as heavy as you can carry without help, even for a longer time.** Heavy things go close to your back and at about shoulder height, light things at the bottom, things you use often at the top and in the side pockets.
- **Keep it within reach**, in a place everyone knows – ideally near your front door. ID, cards, keys and phone are added at the last moment.
- **Check it twice a year:** expiry dates, batteries, power bank – do the clothes still fit (especially children's)?

START SMALL

You don't need to buy a complete backpack today. You probably have a lot already – an old backpack, a torch, a change of clothes, a water bottle. Start with that and add one thing each day. None of these tasks takes more than ten minutes:

- **Pick a backpack** you already have – a hiking pack, a school backpack, a sports bag with straps. One for each person. In the app you can create a packing list for each person under Bags.
- **Put in the first layer of clothing:** underwear, socks, a warm jumper, a rain jacket. It costs nothing and is already worth a lot.

- **Write a phone list on paper** – with your family's numbers, a contact person outside the area and your meeting point – and put it in a plastic sleeve. You can add the printed family plan right away.
- **Make copies:** copy or print your ID card, driving licence, vaccination record and medication plan. More on this in the Document folder guide.
- **Some cash in small notes** in an envelope, in the inside pocket.
- **Add a torch and a power bank:** a hand or head torch with fresh batteries, the power bank charged, the right charging cable with it.
- **Choose a fixed place** for the backpacks – close to the door – and show it to everyone at home. Put the rest (food, first aid kit, radio) on the shopping list and get it bit by bit.

UNDERSTANDING

When you need the emergency bag

For a holiday you pack in peace. If you have to leave your home unexpectedly, there is no time for that. The BBK names typical cases: a leak in a gas pipe, a fire in the house next door, a disaster that is building up. Situations like these can make it necessary to clear individual buildings or even carry out larger and longer evacuations – during a flood, for example.

The BBK describes it like this: there is a fire in your neighbourhood, suddenly your home is affected too, and in the middle of the night you and your family leave the house quickly. If you have a packed backpack and know where your keys, phone and wallet are, you can act calmly instead of searching frantically.

The emergency bag is **not** your supply for home. If you can stay at home – during a power cut, for example – you live off the supplies in your kitchen and cellar (see Drinking water and Food supplies). The emergency bag is only for the journey from here to there and the first days somewhere else.

Why two to three days

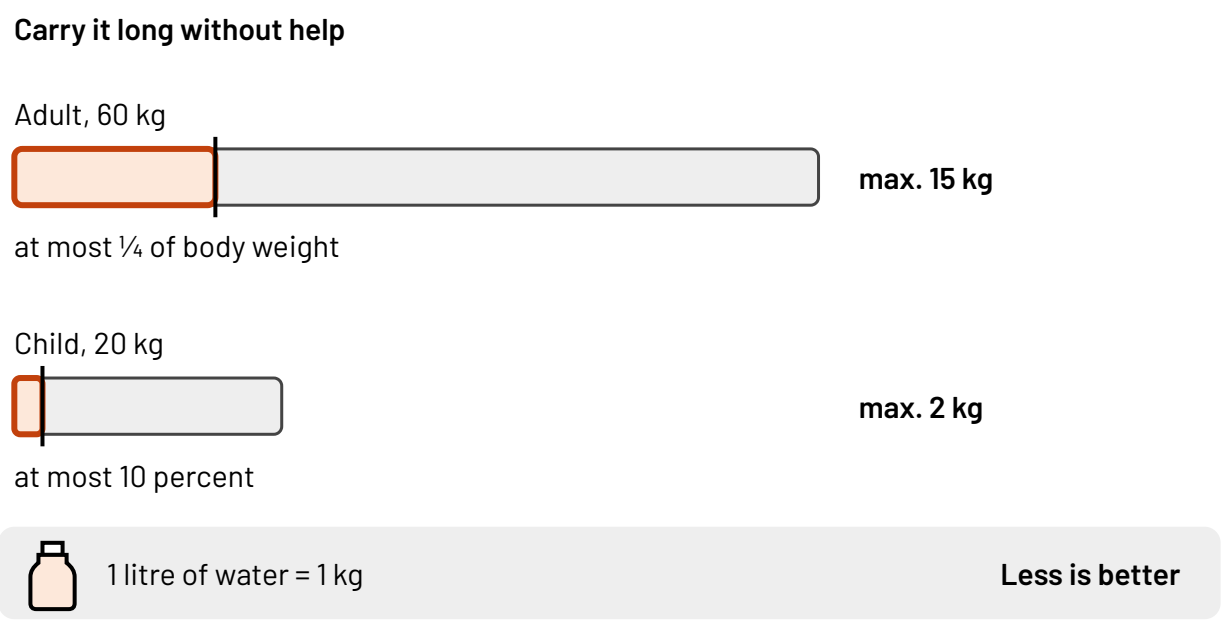
After an evacuation it can take a while before you are allowed back into your home. That is why the BBK advises planning ahead: you may first stay in an emergency shelter or with acquaintances, and the emergency bag should get you through the first days. Hamburg's checklist sets the goal of managing **at least two to three days** without further supplies. The Johanniter speak of being self-sufficient for **48 to 72 hours** per person.

That is why every list includes **food for two days** and a water bottle – not a two-week supply. More would be too heavy. In an emergency shelter or with friends, water and food are usually available again. What you cannot get so easily: your own medication, your glasses, your papers. The BBK stresses that if you have to stay somewhere else for a while, access to medical care may be limited – which makes it especially important to have your personal medication with you.

Why weight matters so much

The older BBK leaflet on the emergency bag puts it simply: the emergency bag may only be so big that it can be **carried without outside help, even for a longer time**. Perhaps no buses are running, the road is closed, you have to walk part of the way to the assembly point, up and down stairs or through rain. A backpack that is too heavy slows you down, hurts, and in the worst case gets left behind – along with your medication and papers.

Alpine clubs give an upper limit for hikers: the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) says a backpack should be no more than **20 to 25 percent of your body weight**, the German Alpine Club (DAV) says **at most a quarter**. For children, the DAV recommends that the packed backpack weighs **no more than ten percent of the child's weight**. These are upper limits for fit, healthy people – not a target. If you are older, have back problems or need to carry a child, pack much lighter. The Johanniter advise choosing the size of the backpack according to your own physical fitness.



Guide values for weight: the BBK says the emergency bag must be carried without help, even for longer. Alpine clubs give at most a quarter of body weight for adults, so 15 kilograms at 60 kilograms; for children at most ten percent, so 2 kilograms at 20 kilograms. Less is better; water weighs one kilogram per litre.

The heaviest thing in the backpack is usually **water**: one litre weighs one kilogram. Then come food and the sleeping bag. Under Bags you can enter the weight of each item; the app adds up the total for you and shows you where you can save weight.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Notgepäck" (website), BBK leaflet on the emergency bag (MVE05), Hamburg "Notfallrucksack", Johanniter LV Nord "Der Notfallrucksack", SAC (6/2022), DAV "Der richtig gepackte Wanderrucksack" (11/2023), DAV "Packliste Wandern mit Kindern" (7/2026).

PREPARING

Choosing the backpack

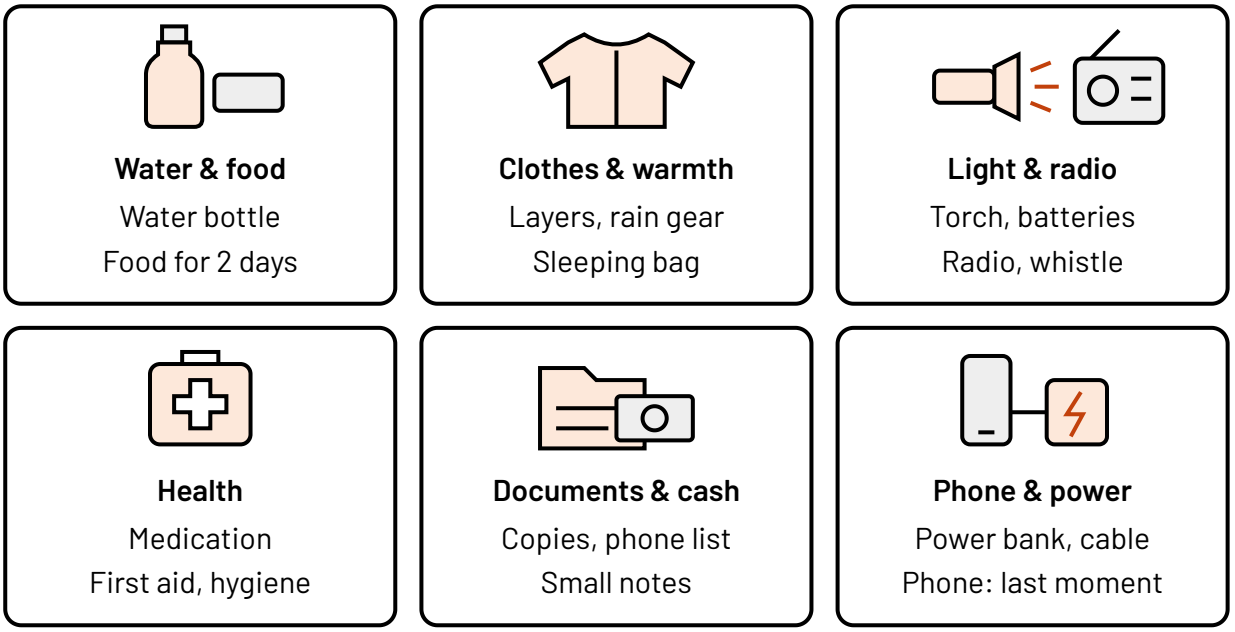
You don't need to buy a special "emergency backpack". A good hiking or travel backpack that you already have is enough. What matters:

- **Size:** the Johanniter name about **30 to 50 litres**, depending on your fitness, and **about 40 litres** in their checklist from North Rhine-Westphalia. For comparison: the SAC considers 30 litres enough for a weekend hike. A bigger backpack tempts you to pack too much.
- **Carrying system:** a padded back, **chest and hip belt** for relief and stability (Johanniter). The carrying system should suit your height and back length (DAV). Some models come in different back lengths – it's best to try them on (SAC).
- **Weather protection:** water-repellent material and a **rain cover** (Johanniter, DAV).
- **No wheeled suitcase:** a backpack is better than a wheeled case because your hands stay free (BBK, Johanniter) – for children, handrails, a torch or the dog's lead.

Children get their own small backpack (see below). For people who cannot carry anything themselves, see "Care needs and medication".

What goes in – by group

The list below sums up what the BBK names in its guide and on its website, with additions from the Johanniter, the Malteser and the City of Hamburg. It is a suggestion, not a must – cross out what you don't need and add what only you need. The same list is stored as a template in the app: under Bags, every new backpack starts with it, and you can adjust it and tick it off.



Six groups for the emergency bag: water and food, clothing and warmth, light and radio, hygiene and first aid, documents and money, phone and power.

1. Water and food

- **Refillable water bottle**, filled (BBK). Hamburg names a 1-litre bottle; the Johanniter reckon with at least two litres per person for 24 hours. Think about how much you can carry.
- **Food for two days**, long-lasting and in **dust-proof packaging** (BBK). Ideally something you can eat **without cooking** (Province of Nova Scotia) – for example cereal or protein bars (Hamburg, Johanniter) or tins (Hamburg). Tins are heavier and need a tin opener.
- **Crockery and cutlery** (BBK), as light as possible.
- Only pack what you like and can tolerate – think of allergies and baby food (BBK).

2. Clothing and warmth

- **Warm clothing, rain protection and sturdy shoes** (BBK). The BBK recommends the **onion principle**: several layers on top of each other, plus a rain jacket or raincoat and sturdy, waterproof shoes or wellies.
- **A change of clothes** for a few days: underwear and socks (BBK, Johanniter).
- **A hat** and **work gloves** (BBK).
- **Sleeping bag or blanket** (BBK), perhaps a sleeping mat (BBK leaflet).
- **Emergency blanket** – it is on the Province of Nova Scotia's list and is also part of the Johanniter's first aid kit.

3. Light and information

- **Torch** with spare batteries (BBK). A head torch leaves your hands free.
- **Radio** that runs on batteries, solar power or a crank (BBK). When mobile networks and the internet fail, warning apps stop working too – but radio stations keep broadcasting.
- **Notepad and pen** (BBK).
- **A list of important phone numbers on paper** (BBK guide, checklist "Information") and a **copy of your emergency plan with a map of the area** (Province of Nova Scotia). Many maps can also be downloaded and used offline (BBK) – in Bereitsein under Map.
- **A whistle** to draw attention to yourself (Province of Nova Scotia, Johanniter).

4. Hygiene and first aid

- **First aid supplies** (BBK) – for example plasters, dressing packs, disinfectant, disposable gloves and scissors; the Johanniter have a detailed list for this.
- **Personal medication** and your medication plan (BBK) – more below under "Care needs and medication".
- **Toiletries**: toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, toilet paper, bin bags, period products, nappies for small children (BBK, Heilbronn fire service, Johanniter).
- **Respirator mask (FFP2)** (BBK).
- **Sun cream** (BBK).

- **Spares for aids** such as glasses or hearing aids (BBK).

5. Documents and money

- **A folder with important documents** (BBK) – packed waterproof, see "The document pouch" below.
- **Cash**, ideally **in small notes** – in case cash machines are not available (BBK, Johanniter, Province of Nova Scotia).

6. Phone and power

- **A charged power bank** (BBK) with **charging cable and adapter** (Johanniter). With it you can keep making calls and getting information.
- The phone camera helps you **document damage** later (BBK).

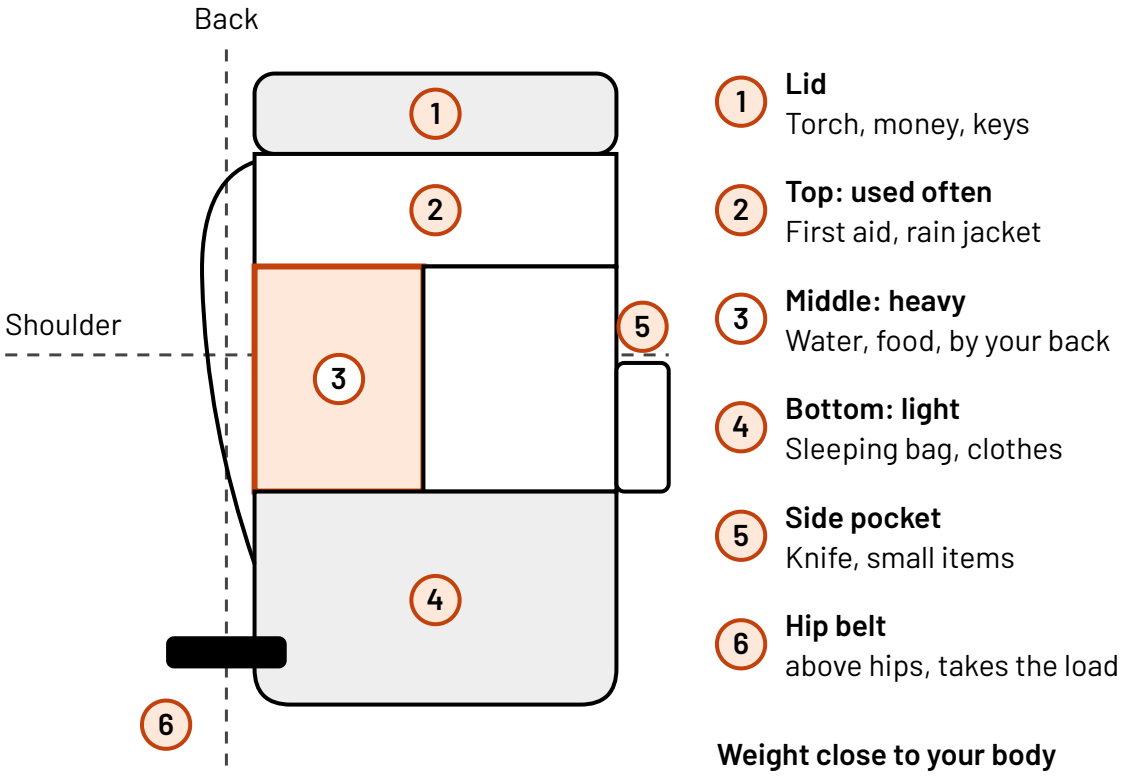
Plus: small tools

- **Pocket knife and tin opener** (BBK).
- **Lighter or matches** (BBK).
- **Keys:** you take your front door key and, if needed, your car key at the last moment (BBK).

The template in the app also contains a spare key, cable ties and a water filter or purification tablets – take what is useful to you. If you want to treat water on the way, first read in the Drinking water guide what these products can and cannot do.

Packing and weight distribution

How you pack decides whether a backpack carries well or badly. Alpine clubs have simple rules for this:



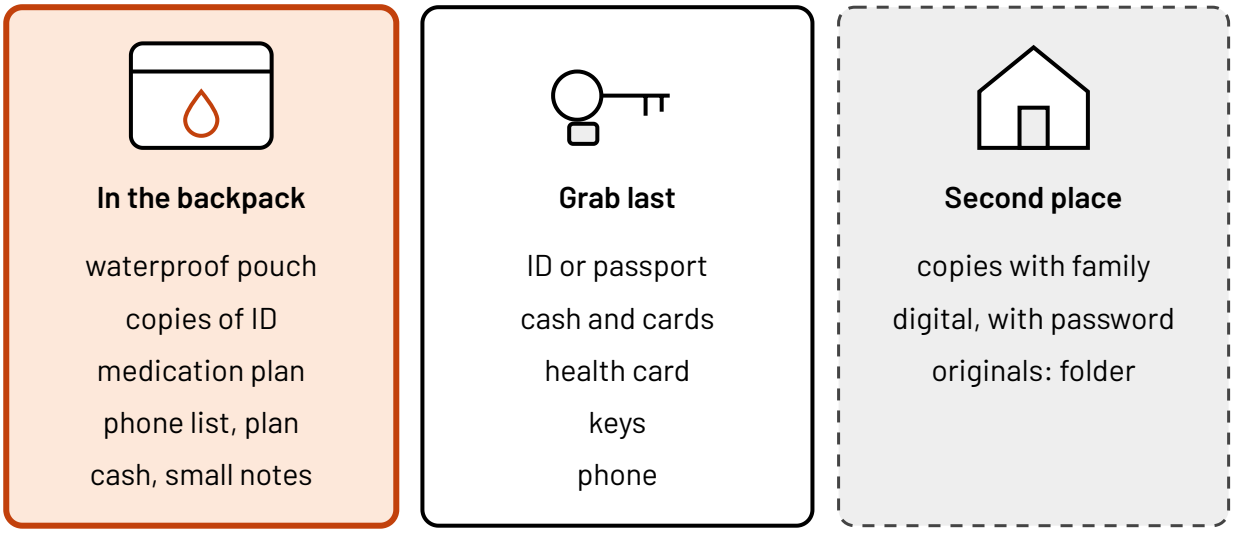
Packing scheme for the backpack: at the top and in the lid go things you use often, such as a torch, first aid and a rain jacket. In the middle, at shoulder height and close to the back, go heavy things such as water and food. At the bottom go light things such as the sleeping bag and spare clothes. Small items in the side pockets, papers and money in the inside pocket. The hip belt sits above the hips and carries most of the weight.

1. **Bottom: light and rarely needed.** Sleeping bag, blanket, change of clothes. The SAC: light things such as the sleeping bag and down jacket go at the bottom of the backpack. The DAV packs the least needed items at the bottom.
2. **Middle, close to your back: heavy.** Water, food, tins. The backpack's centre of gravity should be as close to the body as possible and **at shoulder height** (DAV, SAC). If heavy things sit far from your back, the centre of gravity moves away from your body and the backpack pulls you backwards.
3. **Top and lid: used often or fragile.** Whatever you need more often on the way goes in the upper part and the side pockets (SAC). **First aid kit and rain protection** should be easy to reach (DAV) – as should the torch and radio.
4. **Lid and side pockets: small items.** Pocket knife and other small utensils (DAV).
5. **Store valuables safely:** money and keys in the lid pocket or a hidden compartment (DAV). Put the document pouch where you can find it quickly but won't lose it.
6. **Small things in bags:** pack small items in separate pouches so you find them more easily (SAC) – for example one pouch for "hygiene", one for "power" and one for "first aid".
7. **Put it on properly:** adjust the hip belt so it runs **above the hips** – that is where most of the weight should rest (SAC). Then tighten the shoulder straps and chest strap.

A good test: put on the packed backpack and walk once around the building, including down the stairs and back up. If something presses, the backpack sways, or it is too heavy for you, repack or take something out.

The document pouch

If you have to leave the house suddenly, important documents should be within reach: in a fire or flood they can be lost, and it can be difficult or impossible to replace them (BBK). The BBK advises keeping them in a **fireproof or waterproof container**; in the emergency bag they should be **packed waterproof** (BBK leaflet). The Johanniter recommend sorting them in an expanding file and protecting them against water.



Everyone knows where they are

Documents in three places: the waterproof pouch in the backpack holds copies of ID and vaccination record, the medication plan, a phone list, the emergency plan and cash. At the last moment, ID, cards, keys and phone are added. A second place holds copies with relatives or digitally.

What goes in the pouch in the backpack – for the first days, copies are usually enough:

- **Copies** of your ID card or passport, driving licence, vaccination record (BBK: a simple copy is enough)
- Your **medication plan** and, if you have one, a **medical ID** with illnesses, allergies, aids and emergency contacts (BBK). You can create and print one in Bereitsein under Medical ID.
- A **phone list on paper** and the printed family plan with meeting points
- **Cash** in small notes
- Copies of insurance papers (Province of Nova Scotia)

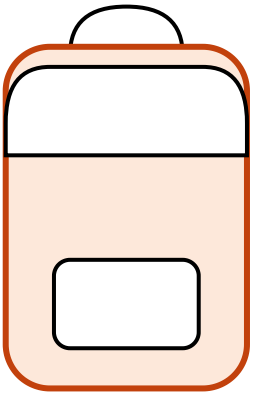
What you grab at the last moment – things you can't pack in advance because you need them every day (BBK): ID card or passport, cash and bank cards, health insurance card, vaccination record, front door key and, if needed, car key, phone. Always put them in the same place at home so you don't have to search.

What belongs in a second place: the BBK advises making **digital copies** of important documents or **leaving copies elsewhere** – with relatives, friends, a notary or in a bank safe deposit box. According to the BBK, you can store digital documents in a cloud, on a portable hard drive or on a USB stick. This is sensitive data – protect it with a password.

Originals such as birth and marriage certificates or a will are kept in the **document folder** at home, which you take along as well in an evacuation. Whether a document has to be an original or a certified copy is something the office that issued it can tell you (BBK). Everything about this is in the Document folder guide. And: everyone in the household should know where the folder is (BBK).

The children's backpack

Every child should have their own emergency bag (Province of Nova Scotia, BBK). It gives children a sense of security: they know what is inside and have something of their own with them. Many children like to carry their most important things themselves – for example a cuddly toy, a water bottle and a small snack (DAV).



max. 10%
of the child's weight

In it:

- ✓ small water bottle
- ✓ snacks
- ✓ rain jacket
- ✓ change of clothes
- ✓ small torch
- ✓ cuddly toy



Neck pouch
name
date of birth
address

Adults carry the rest

Children's backpack: no more than ten percent of the child's weight. In it go a small water bottle, snacks, a rain jacket, spare clothes, a torch and a cuddly toy. Plus a neck pouch or SOS capsule with name, date of birth and address. The parents carry the rest.

- **Weight:** the packed backpack should weigh **no more than ten percent of the child's weight** (DAV). For a child of 20 kilograms that is 2 kilograms – really just the essentials. Water, food for everyone and spare clothes are carried by the adults.
- **What can go in:** a small water bottle, a few snacks, a rain jacket, a change of clothes with socks and a hat, a small torch, a cuddly toy or a small game. That is also what the children's template under Bags contains.
- **Name and address on the child:** the BBK recommends a **neck pouch or SOS capsule with name, date of birth and address** for children. That way the child can be matched to you if you get

separated by accident. SOS capsules are sold in department stores, pharmacies and chemists. A note with your phone numbers and the meeting point in their jacket helps too (see the guide Children in a crisis).

- **For babies and toddlers:** nappies (BBK, Heilbronn fire service) and infant formula and baby food (Canada) – these go in an adult's backpack.
- **Remember they grow:** at every check, see whether the packed clothes still fit – especially for children, who grow quickly (Province of Nova Scotia).

Let your child help with packing. You can explain playfully what the emergency bag is for – calmly and without frightening pictures.

Pets

"What is good for you is good for your pet," writes the US health authority CDC: take animals with you when you evacuate. If you leave them behind, they may get lost or injured. The CDC lists for a pet emergency kit:

- **Lead, collar with tag** and a harness if needed; a **suitable carrier** with a blanket or towel. Keep the lead and carrier close to the exit.
- **Label the carrier** with your pet's name, your name and your phone numbers.
- **Identification:** a collar with current contact details; if the animal is microchipped, keep the details up to date with the registry.
- **Copies of papers** in a waterproof container: vaccinations, medical history, medication, plus **recent photos** of your pet.
- **Food and water:** the CDC names a **two-week** supply per animal, plus bowls and feeding instructions. That is a lot to carry – think about what fits in the backpacks and what you put ready next to them.
- The animal's **medication** with instructions, cat litter and a tray, bags and cleaning supplies, a toy.

Find out in advance where you can stay with your pet: the CDC points out that emergency shelters do not always take pets – service animals excepted. Alternatives can be friends and relatives outside the area or a boarding kennel. More in the guide People who need care, and pets.

Care needs and medication

Personal medication belongs in everyone's emergency bag. If you need aids or support in everyday life, think carefully as well about what you would need if you had to leave the house quickly. The BBK lists:

- **Aids** such as glasses or hearing aids – and spares
- **Spare batteries, rechargeable batteries and chargers** for technical aids
- **Mobility aids**, if you have to leave the house quickly
- A **medication plan** and a **supply of the medication you need** (watch the expiry dates and storage)

- **Pet food and water** for an assistance animal
- A **list of emergency contacts** and a **medical ID**

How much medication? For the emergency kit of people with disabilities, the CDC advises **at least one week's supply** of all prescription medication and a cool box for medication that has to be kept cold. The contact list of the people who support you should be kept in a watertight container. Talk to your doctor or pharmacy about how to build up a small supply.

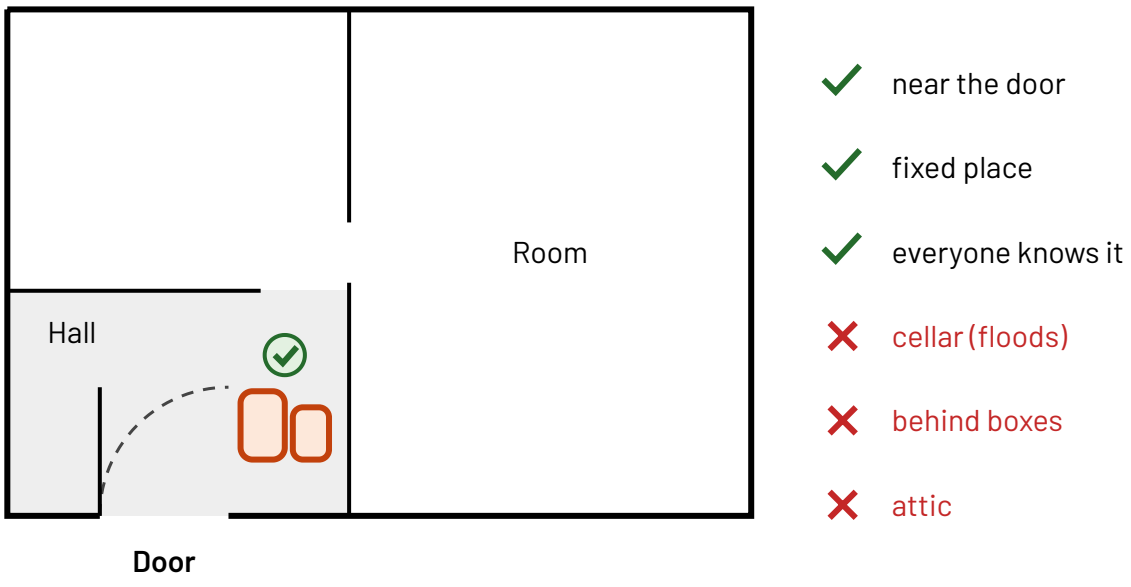
If you cannot use escape routes on your own, think in advance about who can support you and how (BBK). Talk to neighbours, relatives or your care service. A medical ID as well as pen and paper help you communicate with emergency services (BBK). You can create the ID in Bereitsein under Medical ID. If you care for someone who cannot carry anything, pack their emergency bag into the others' backpacks or plan who carries what.

Workplace and car

The Province of Nova Scotia advises considering an emergency bag not only at home but **also at work and in your vehicle**. It can be smaller than the one at home – a selection from the list above that suits your route. The BBK also advises knowing the escape routes not only at home but also at your workplace. For water in the car, read in the Drinking water guide why PET bottles should not lie in sun and heat for long.

Where the backpack goes

The BBK speaks of an emergency bag that is **within reach**. The Johanniter advise a central, easily accessible place that everyone in the household knows; the Government of Canada gives the **front-hall closet** as an example, and for pets the CDC advises keeping the lead and carrier **close to the exit**.



Where the backpack belongs: in the hallway close to the front door, in a fixed place everyone knows. Not in the cellar, which is dangerous in a flood, and not behind boxes in the attic.

- **Good:** in the hallway, on the coat rack, in the cupboard next to the door – in a fixed place.
- **Not in the cellar:** during a flood, the BBK says you should not enter the cellar under any circumstances.
- **Not behind clutter:** right at the back of a cupboard or in the attic, you won't find it at night.
- **Everyone knows:** show everyone in the household where the backpacks and the document folder are – children too.

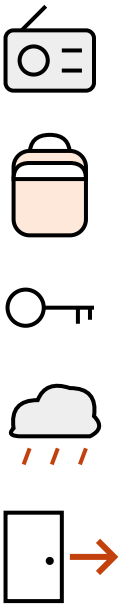
Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Notgepäck" and "Dokumente sichern" (websites), BBK leaflet on the emergency bag (MVE05), Heilbronn fire service "Im Notfall vorbereitet", Hamburg "Notfallrucksack", Johanniter LV Nord and Johanniter NRW, Malteser "Evakuierung", DAV (11/2023, 7/2026), SAC (6/2022), Province of Nova Scotia (7/2026), Government of Canada (9/2025), CDC (2024).

IN AN EMERGENCY

When you have to leave – step by step

How much time you have depends on the situation. In a fire every second counts; in an announced evacuation there are often a few minutes. The order stays the same: people first, then the backpack, then everything else.

1. **Stay calm**
   Follow announcements, radio
2. **Take your backpack**
   one per person
3. **Add the last things**
   ID, money, keys, phone
4. **Dress for the weather**
   Children and pets ready
5. **Leave, tell others**
   Meeting point, rescuers



Fire: get out, never go back

Grab and go in five steps: 1. Stay calm, follow announcements. 2. Take one backpack per person. 3. Add the last things: ID, money and cards, keys, phone. 4. Dress for the weather, look after children and pets. 5. Leave and tell others. In a fire: get out at once, never go back.

1. **Stay calm and get information:** listen for announcements from the police, fire service and others (Malteser), switch on the radio or a warning app and follow the instructions (BBK).
2. **In a fire: get out at once.** Never escape through smoke-filled rooms or stairwells – just a few breaths of smoke can be deadly. The rule always applies: don't put yourself in danger (BBK). If the backpack isn't on your way out, it stays behind. Warn the people in your household and the neighbours, call 112.
3. **Take one backpack per person.** Everyone takes their own, children their small one.
4. **Add the last things:** ID card or passport, cash and bank cards, health insurance card, vaccination record, front door and car keys, phone (BBK). If you take medication every day: add the supply from the bathroom or kitchen. Take the document folder.
5. **Dress for the weather:** layers of clothing, a rain jacket, sturdy shoes or wellies (BBK). Put the backpack on, close the hip belt.
6. **Children and pets:** hang the neck pouch or SOS capsule around your child's neck (BBK). Pets on the lead or into the carrier (CDC).
7. **If there is time:** turn off the water and gas supply, switch off lights and electrical appliances such as kettles and irons, close windows and doors (Malteser). The details are in the Evacuation guide.
8. **Leave and tell others:** if you know of people who are still in the danger area, tell the rescue services (Malteser). Pass on information from the authorities to others (BBK). Text your family and go to the agreed meeting point.
9. **Sort out where to stay:** as soon as you have left the danger area, sort out where you will stay – with friends, relatives or acquaintances (Malteser), otherwise in the emergency shelter named by the authorities.

You only find out how long it really takes when you practise. Under Drill there is an exercise in which you leave your home with your emergency bags within ten minutes – as if the call came right now.

On the way and in the emergency shelter

- **Keep the backpack with you:** don't leave papers, money and medication unattended.
- **Save your phone battery:** short messages instead of long calls, the power bank for essentials. Get information from the radio (see Power cut).
- **Keep an eye on the children:** the neck pouch or capsule stays on the child until you have arrived.
- **Keep taking your medication** as planned. If something is missing, tell the helpers early.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Notgepäck" (website), Malteser "Evakuierung", CDC "Pet Safety in Emergencies" (4/2024).

AFTERWARDS

Back home

- **When you return, too,** follow the authorities' instructions (BBK).
- **Photograph damage:** with your phone camera you can document damage for the insurance company (BBK).
- What to do after a flood is in the Floods and heavy rain guide.

Unpack, refill, put it back

An emergency bag that has been used is often half empty, wet or in a mess afterwards. A few days after you get back, take half an hour:

1. **Take everything out**, dry wet things, wash the clothes.
2. **Replace what was used:** food, water, medication, plasters, batteries. Whatever is missing goes on the shopping list.
3. **Top up the power:** charge the power bank, check the batteries.
4. **Documents back:** originals into the folder, copies into the pouch, refill the cash.
5. **Repack** following the packing scheme and put the backpack back in its place by the door. In the app, "Unpack everything (check again)" under Bags clears all the ticks so you can tick items off again one by one.

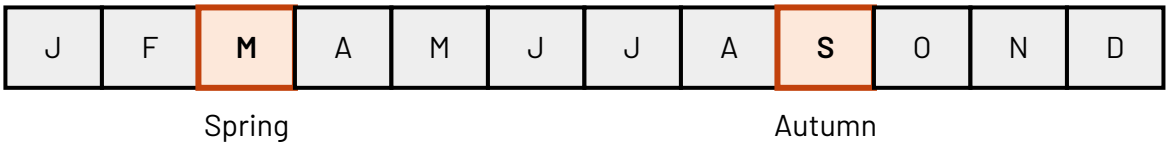
Learning from it

Sit down together briefly: what was missing? What was too heavy? What did nobody need? Did everyone know where their backpack was? Improving one thing is enough – lighter food, for example, or a second torch.

Check it twice a year

Even an unused emergency bag ages. The Province of Nova Scotia advises checking it **twice a year** and replacing anything that is out of date; the CDC also recommends reviewing the emergency kit **every six months**. The Government of Canada names as a minimum replacing food, water, batteries and medication **at least once a year**. The Johanniter remind you to check regularly so that food, medication and electronics stay usable.

CHECK TWICE A YEAR



- [ ] Expiry dates
- [ ] Clothes for the season
- [ ] Batteries, power bank
- [ ] Phone list up to date
- [ ] Clothes still fit
- [ ] Cash complete

Fixed dates make it easy

Check plan twice a year, for example in March and September: expiry dates of food and medication, batteries and power bank, whether clothes still fit and suit the season, documents and phone list up to date, cash complete.

Choose two fixed dates, for example one in spring and one in autumn. A good fixed date in Germany is the nationwide warning day in September. Then check:

- **Expiry dates** of food, medication, first aid supplies and, if relevant, water
- **Batteries:** replace or check them; **charge the power bank**
- **Clothing:** does it still fit – especially children's (Province of Nova Scotia)? Does it suit the season? The province explicitly lists seasonal clothing.
- **Documents and list:** are the phone numbers, meeting points and medication plan still right?
- **Cash:** is it all still there?

In the app you can set a "Check by" date for each item under Bags – Bereitsein reminds you in good time when medication, food or batteries are due.

Sources for this section: BBK "Notgepäck" (website), Province of Nova Scotia (7/2026), CDC "Building an Emergency Kit" (9/2024), Government of Canada (9/2025), Johanniter LV Nord.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Wanting to buy everything at once:** start with what you have and add to it bit by bit.
- **One backpack for everyone:** each person needs their own – otherwise everything is missing if you get separated.
- **Packing too heavy:** if you can't carry it for longer without help, it gets left behind in an emergency.
- **Heavy things right at the bottom or far out:** that pulls you backwards. Heavy things close to your back, at shoulder height.

- **A wheeled suitcase instead of a backpack:** your hands need to stay free.
- **Only originals, no copies:** if originals are lost, they are hard to replace. Copies in the pouch, a second copy in another place.
- **Unprotected papers:** pack documents waterproof.
- **Forgetting medication:** it is the most important thing you can't easily replace.
- **Backpack in the cellar or attic:** it belongs within reach by the door.
- **Going back into a fire for the backpack:** never. People come first.
- **Never checking:** expired bars, flat batteries and children's jackets that are too small don't help.
- **Children without name and address:** neck pouch or SOS capsule with name, date of birth and address.

CHECKLIST

Backpack

- [ ] One backpack per person, a small one for children
- [ ] Padded back, chest and hip belt, rain cover
- [ ] Weight tested: can be carried for longer without help, children no more than 10% of their weight
- [ ] Packed by the scheme: light at the bottom, heavy close to the back, often-used at the top

Water and food

- [ ] Full, refillable water bottle
- [ ] Food for 2 days, in dust-proof packaging, edible without cooking
- [ ] Crockery, cutlery, tin opener

Clothing and warmth

- [ ] Warm clothes in layers, rain jacket, sturdy shoes
- [ ] Change of clothes, underwear, socks
- [ ] Hat, work gloves
- [ ] Sleeping bag or blanket, emergency blanket

Light, information, power

- [ ] Hand or head torch with spare batteries
- [ ] Radio with batteries, solar or crank
- [ ] Charged power bank, charging cable, adapter
- [ ] Notepad, pen, whistle

Hygiene and health

- [ ] Personal medication (at least 1 week) and medication plan
- [ ] First aid supplies
- [ ] Toiletries, toilet paper, bin bags, period products, nappies if needed
- [ ] FFP2 masks, sun cream
- [ ] Spare glasses or spares for hearing aids, batteries and chargers for aids

Documents and money

- [ ] Waterproof pouch with copies of ID, driving licence, vaccination record
- [ ] Phone list on paper, printed family plan, map of the area
- [ ] Medical ID filled in
- [ ] Cash in small notes
- [ ] Copies or digital copies in a second place

Tools

- [ ] Pocket knife, lighter or matches

Children and pets

- [ ] Neck pouch or SOS capsule with name, date of birth, address
- [ ] Cuddly toy or small game, clothes in the right size
- [ ] For pets: lead, carrier with name and phone number, food, copies of vaccination records, photo

Storing and checking

- [ ] Fixed place close to the door, everyone knows it
- [ ] A fixed spot for ID, cards, keys and phone that is always the same
- [ ] Checked twice a year (for example March and September)
- [ ] Practised an emergency once

SOURCES

All links checked on 5 November 2026. German sources are listed with their original titles.

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CHAPTER 5

EVACUATION AND FAMILY PLAN

When to leave, where to go, which route to take – and how to find each other again if you are separated.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

DO NOW

1. Follow the authorities' instructions (radio, warning app, announcements)
2. Take your emergency bag, documents, medication and phone with charger
3. Stove and appliances off, taps off, close windows and doors
4. Tell your neighbours, help those who need help
5. Text your contact person, go to the agreed meeting point

A plan made calmly works in a rush. A plan made in a rush usually doesn't.

Many evacuations are short and well organised – for example when a Second World War aerial bomb has to be defused and a neighbourhood is cleared for a day. Others come suddenly: a fire in the building, a smell of gas, rising water. The same things help in both cases: you know where you will meet, how you will reach each other and what comes with you. The plan doesn't have to be finished in one evening. Start with the meeting points and fill in the rest bit by bit.

AT A GLANCE

- **When the authorities call for an evacuation, you go** – promptly and the way they tell you. The sooner an area is empty, the sooner you can come back.
- **Three meeting points:** right by the house, in the neighbourhood and outside town. Plus **one contact person outside the region** whom everyone reports to.
- **Two routes** to every destination, in different directions, one of them doable on foot – on the offline map and on paper.
- **Emergency bag ready to grab:** one backpack per person, plus documents, medication, phone with charger, keys and money.
- **Before you leave:** stove and appliances off, taps off, close windows and doors, tell your neighbours. Shut off gas and electricity at the main only if the authorities say so or flooding is coming.
- **Go back only once the area is released** – not because it looks quiet outside.

START SMALL

Pick one of these tasks each day. None takes longer than ten minutes, and none costs anything:

- **Choose meeting point 1:** Go outside and pick a spot on your side of the street – a lamp post, a tree, a garden gate. Tell everyone in the household and add it on the Map or in the family plan.
- **Ask a contact person:** Call someone who lives further away and ask whether they would be your "headquarters" in an emergency, the person everyone reports to.
- **Numbers on paper:** Write the most important phone numbers on a slip of paper – one for each person, for the wallet or school bag.
- **Download the offline map:** In the Map, download the region where you live and where you would go – on Wi-Fi, while you can.
- **Ask the nursery and school:** What happens there during an evacuation, where do the children go, and who may pick them up? Check that your current numbers are on file.
- **Arrange somewhere to stay:** Ask relatives or friends in another town whether you could stay with them for a few days in an emergency – and whether pets are welcome.
- **Ten-minute test:** In Drill, start the "Evacuation" scenario and see how long it takes until everyone is at the door with their emergency bag.

UNDERSTANDING

Who decides that you leave

Usually the authorities decide: the public order office, fire service, police or civil protection. You hear about it through warning apps such as NINA, the mobile phone alert (cell broadcast), the radio, loudspeaker vans and your town's website – or because emergency services ring your doorbell. If the siren wails up and down for one minute, it means: there is danger, find out what is happening. You can also see current warnings for your district under Warnings.

An evacuation order is not a request. Wiesbaden, for example, states explicitly that you may not stay despite an evacuation, and in 2026 residents in Hameln were told that they would be escorted out of the house if necessary and could be fined. But there is also a friendlier reason to leave promptly: **the sooner the area is cleared, the sooner the specialists can start – and the sooner you are back home.**

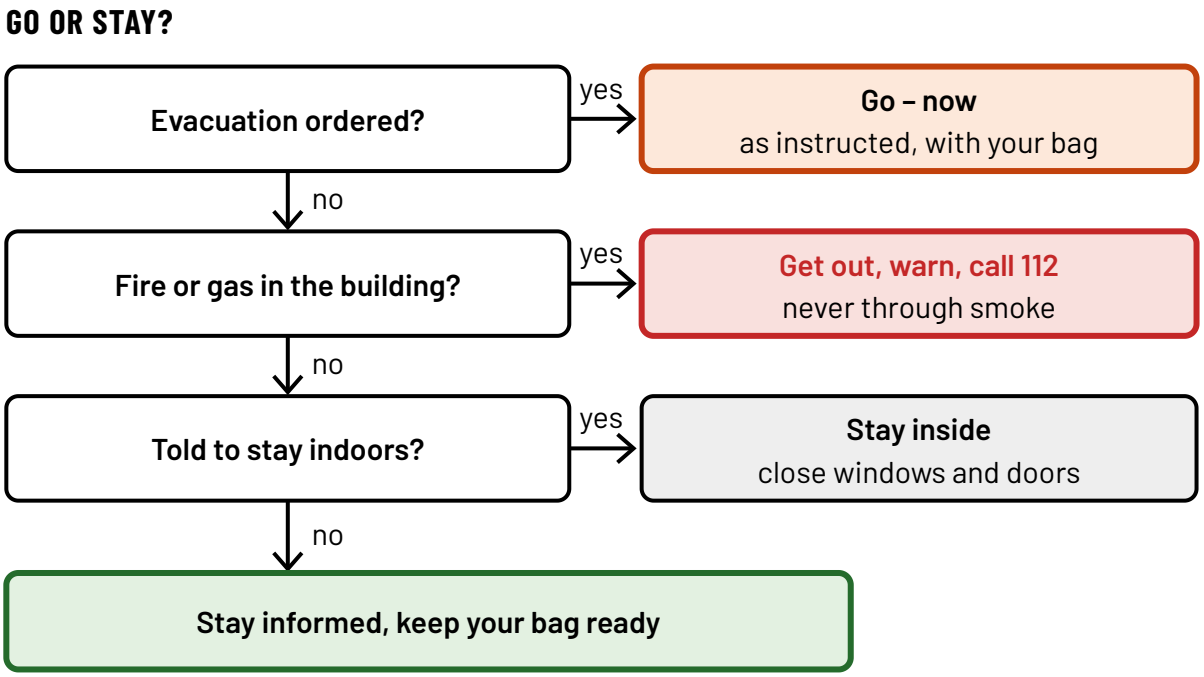
Sometimes nobody has time to warn you. If there is a fire in your home and you can't put it out safely, or gases, fumes or dangerous liquids are escaping inside the building, you leave the building on your own initiative (BBK).

Go or stay?

"Away from home" is not always the safest option. The BBK gives examples of where to find shelter depending on the situation:

- **Gases or fumes outdoors:** go inside, close and seal windows and doors, switch off ventilation, go to upper floors if possible – most gases are heavier than air.
- **Gases or fumes inside the building:** get out.
- **Flood, heavy rain, flash flood:** go to higher areas or floors. Never into the cellar – if it floods, the door can no longer be opened from inside, and there is a risk of electric shock. Avoid underground car parks, underground stations and underpasses.
- **Fire:** get out, but never through smoke-filled rooms or stairwells. If the escape routes are full of smoke, make yourself heard loudly at a window.

The authorities can also order everyone to stay at home (BABS). So what the warnings and announcements say always comes first.



Decision path: If an evacuation is ordered, go immediately, as instructed and with your emergency bag. If not: if there is fire or gas in the building, get out, warn others and call 112, never through smoke. If not: if the authorities say stay indoors, stay inside and close windows and doors. Otherwise stay informed and keep your emergency bag ready.

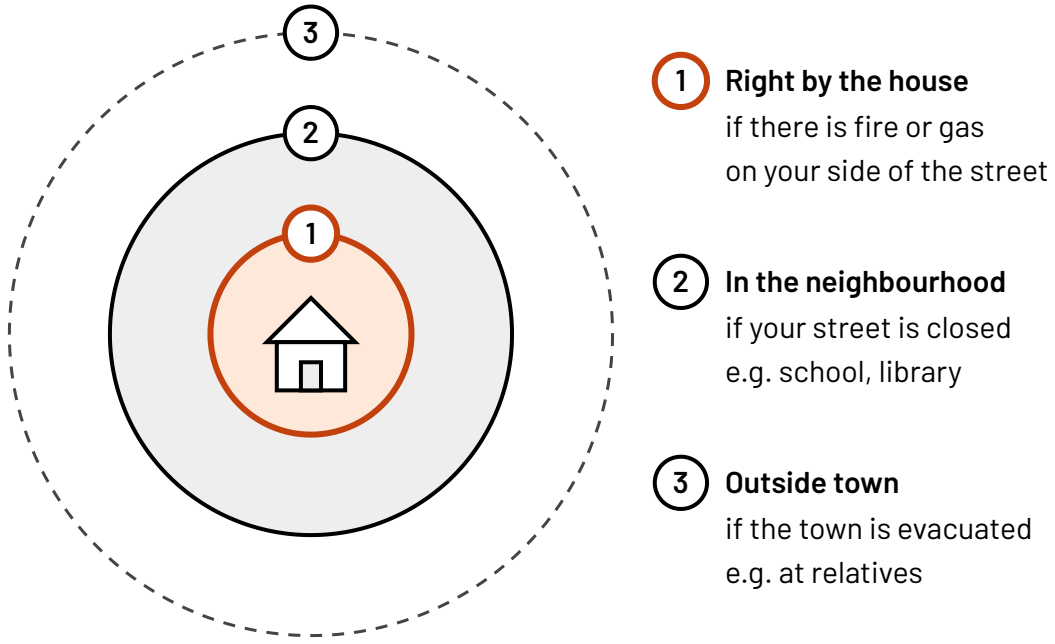
Why three meeting points

In an emergency, the whole family is rarely at home – someone is at work, a child at school, someone else out and about (BBK 2018). And that is exactly when mobile networks and the internet can fail, for example because of a power cut, a storm, sabotage or a cyber attack (BBK). A place agreed in advance works without a phone.

One meeting point is not enough, because not every situation has the same size. That is why authorities in the US and Canada recommend meeting points in stages. They become three rings:

1. **Right by the house** – for anything that affects only your building: fire, a smell of gas. Ideally on your side of the street, so nobody has to cross between traffic and emergency vehicles (Canada).
2. **In the neighbourhood** – if you can't get home, for example because your street is closed. A place everyone knows and finds easily: a school, a library, a community centre (Canada) or a supermarket car park (Wisconsin).
3. **Outside town** – if the whole town or district is evacuated. For example a car park in the next town (Wisconsin) or straight to the home of relatives or friends.

THREE MEETING POINTS



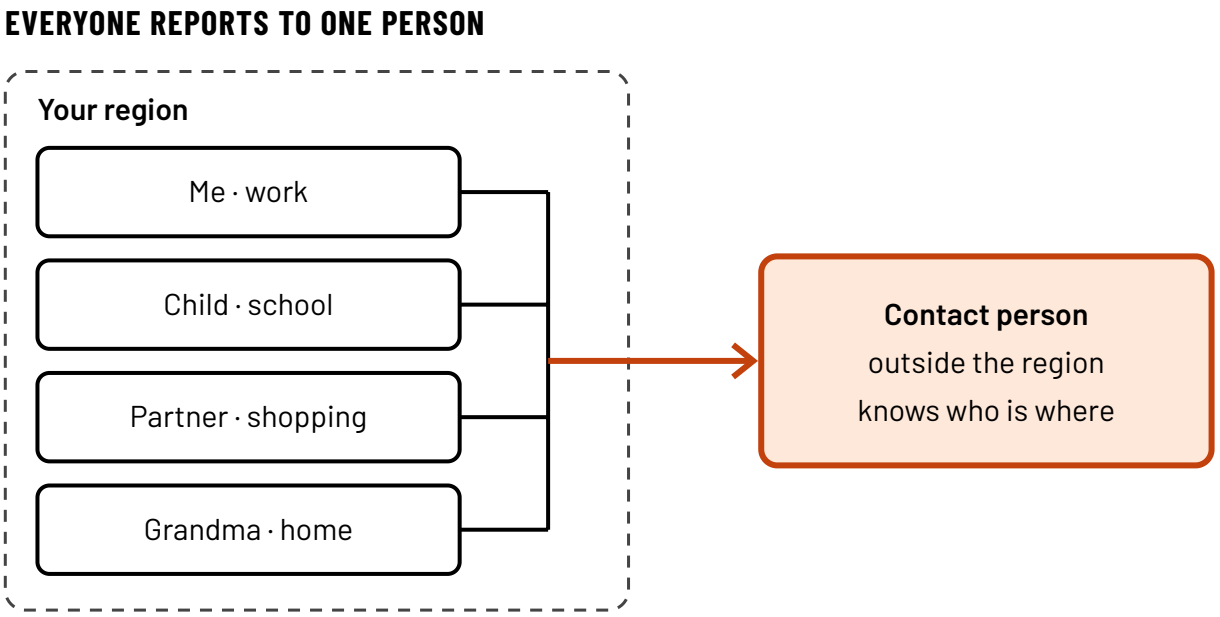
Three rings around your home: meeting point 1 right by the house, for fire or a smell of gas, on your side of the street. Meeting point 2 in the neighbourhood, if your street is closed, for example a school or library. Meeting point 3 outside town, if the town is evacuated, for example at relatives.

Don't mix them up: Many municipalities set up their own **emergency meeting points** or information points, for example in town halls. There you can get information in an emergency; in Baden-Württemberg they are meant to offer shelter, first aid, information and essentials such as water and food (BBK, Baden-Württemberg Ministry of the Interior). These are not family meeting points, but they are good places to know. Ask your municipality and add them to the plan as an "important place".

Why a contact person outside the region

When everyone in a region tries to phone at once, the networks quickly become overloaded (Wisconsin). Someone who lives further away is often easier to reach (FEMA). That is why **every family member reports to the same person** – far enough away that they are unlikely to be affected by the same event (Canada). They collect the messages and soon know who is where, even if you can't reach each other.

The rule is: **text, don't call.** A text message needs far less network capacity than a call, often still gets through when calls fail, and doesn't block lines that emergency services need (FEMA, Canada). If you have to call, keep it short.



Text, don’t call: “I’m OK, meeting point 2”

All family members in the region – at work, at school, out shopping, at home – report to the same contact person outside the region, who knows who is where. A short text instead of a call, for example: I'm OK, meeting point 2.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Disasters Alarm" (12/2018), BABS emergency plan (10/2022), Treptow-Köpenick district office, City of Wiesbaden, City of Hameln (4/2026), Baden-Württemberg Ministry of the Interior (9/2022), Government of Canada (9/2025), ReadyWisconsin, FEMA Family Communication Plan.

PREPARING

Your plan in Bereitsein

You create the whole plan in the family plan: who belongs to the household (with special needs such as medication, help needed, school or nursery), **when you leave**, meeting points, destinations, routes, contacts, emergency bags and your "Before leaving home" list. For "When we leave", Bereitsein suggests four triggers – the authorities call for evacuation, immediate danger, home no longer habitable, water or medication supply no longer secure. Tick the ones that apply to you; then there is nothing to discuss in an emergency.

Print the plan. FEMA advises keeping copies in several places – in your wallet, in the car, at work, in your emergency bag – and looking it over **once a year**. With "Show QR code" you pass it from phone to phone without any internet; afterwards Bereitsein shows what has changed since you last shared it.

Choosing meeting points

A good meeting point is **easy to find**, also for children and in the dark, and **reachable on foot**. The BBK advises discussing escape routes and meeting points together – including whether they can be reached. Talk through how each person gets there from home, work or school.

1. Open the Map, tap "✎ Set places" and then the spot. Choose "Meeting point" as the type and a name everyone understands ("lamp post outside no. 12", not "M1").
2. Or stand on the spot and press "📍 Here" in the family plan.
3. Also add **important places**: school and nursery, work, GP, pharmacy and your municipality's emergency meeting point.

Destinations: where you can stay for a few days

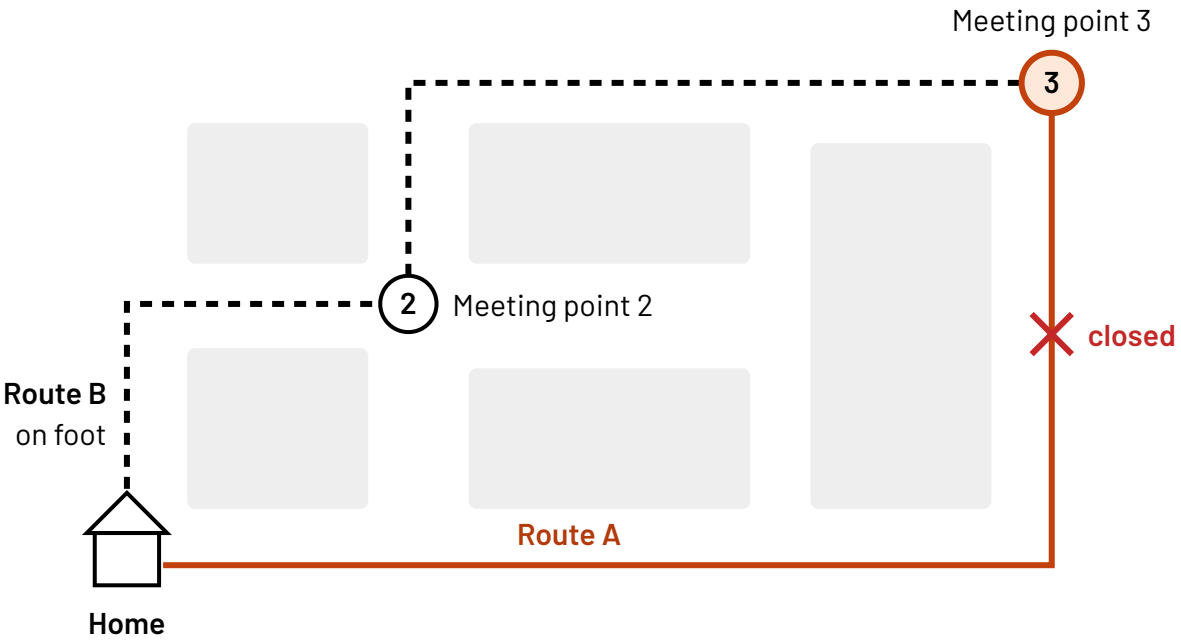
Think of one or more places where you could stay for a few days – with relatives or friends, in a holiday flat (BABS, Cologne). The Swiss Federal Office for Civil Protection advises: **not too close and not too far.** Too close, and the place may be hit by the same event; too far, and you won't get there.

- **Main destination** and **alternative destination**, ideally in different directions, agreed in advance – including whether pets are welcome.
- **Write down how you will get there:** means of transport and route. In an emergency, however, the authorities may issue their own orders (BABS).
- **Emergency shelter** as a last resort: for everyone who can't stay elsewhere, towns set up reception or care centres.

Routes: two ways, one on foot

During an evacuation, expect road closures and changed timetables; they are often only announced when it happens (Cologne, Nuremberg). So:

- **Two routes** to every destination, ideally in **different directions**. If one is closed, take the other.
- **Avoid main roads** where you can (BABS).
- **One route on foot.** Also plan a way out of your neighbourhood (Canada).
- **In a flood,** no flooded roads, underpasses or riverbanks (BBK).



Two routes, different directions, also on paper

Sketch with two routes from home to meeting point 3: route A follows the main road and is closed at one point. Route B goes on foot in the other direction, via meeting point 2. Both routes are also marked on paper.

Don't rely on the mobile network. The BBK points out that many maps can be downloaded and used offline – that is exactly what the Map in Bereitsein is for. In the Android app you download your federal state; in the browser you open a map file, which then works offline. Your meeting points, destinations and important places appear on it, with distance and direction from where you are. You can also download **relief and contour lines**: they show where the ground rises – in a flood, higher areas offer the best protection (BBK). If you want turn-by-turn directions, you can add the free, open-source app Organic Maps; the "Route" button opens it with the destination. It is not necessary.

Even so: **mark both routes on a paper map** and put it in your emergency bag – the City of Hannover explicitly recommends a road map showing the assembly points for evacuations. Walk or drive each route once; that is the only way to find out where it gets stuck (Wisconsin).

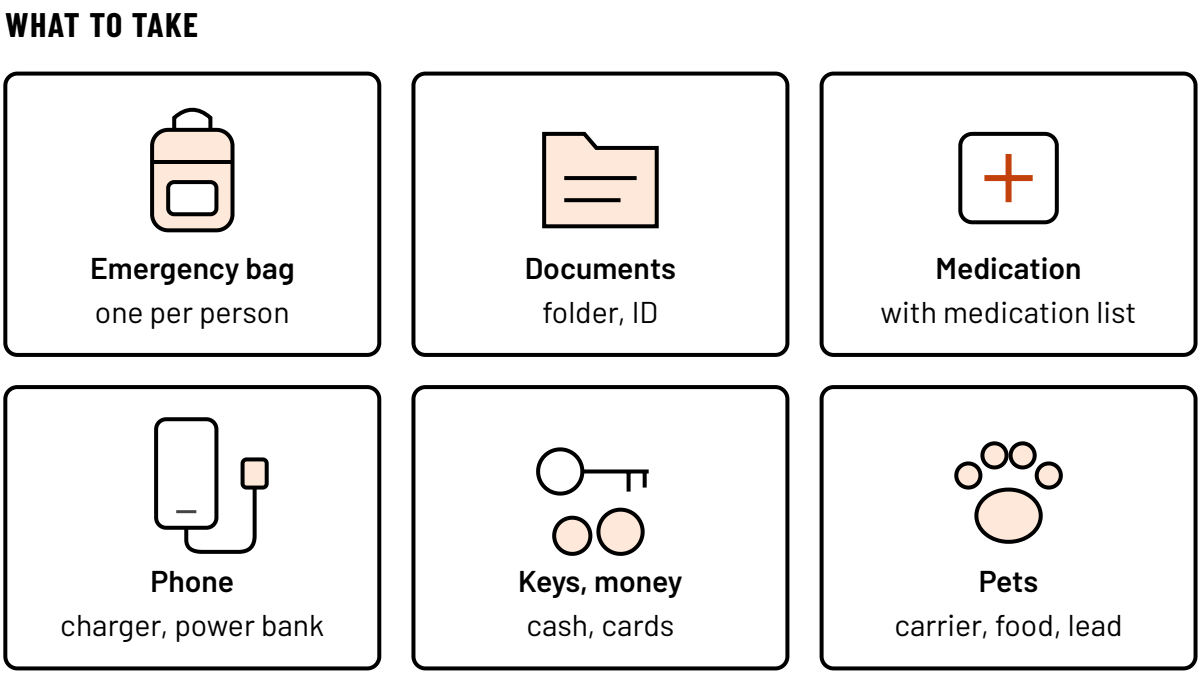
Contacts and communication

- **Numbers on paper:** A printed or handwritten list helps when you can't get at your saved contacts (BBK). Include the numbers of school and childcare, employer, neighbours and relatives who need care (BABS). One copy in every wallet and every emergency bag.
- **Stay reachable:** When a crisis is looming, keep your phone switched on at night too (BBK), with a charged power bank.
- **Agree on short messages:** for example "I'm OK. Meeting point 2. 2 pm." – who, where, when.
- **Be seen and heard:** If you are trapped, Signal makes your phone flash SOS with its light or sound a whistle – without a network.

Emergency bag and documents

When it has to be quick, there is no time to think. The BBK advises taking no more than fits into **one backpack per person** – a backpack keeps both hands free. It should get you through the first few days, for example in an emergency shelter or with friends, because it can take a while before you are allowed back.

According to the BBK it should contain, among other things: warm clothes, rain protection and sturdy shoes, a change of clothes, important documents, a charged power bank, first-aid supplies, personal medication and toiletries, non-perishable food, a refillable water bottle, cash, a torch and a battery or wind-up radio. **In an emergency, add:** ID card or passport, money and cards, health insurance card, vaccination record, keys and your phone.



What to take: emergency bag, one per person; documents in a folder with ID; medication with medication list; phone with charger and power bank; keys, cash and cards; pets with carrier, food and lead. Don't forget glasses, hearing aids and baby things.

A good test question from Switzerland: **Could you pack the essentials within half an hour?** If not, they aren't ready to grab yet. Tick off what is in which bag under Emergency bags; more in the guide Packing an emergency bag.

Documents belong together in one folder, ideally in a fireproof or waterproof container, plus a digital copy (BBK). You can leave duplicates with relatives, and everyone in the household should know where the folder is (BBK 2018). More in the guide Document folder.

Where's what at home

Everyone in the household should know where the main water tap, fuse box and gas shut-off are and how to operate them – the Canadian government's family plan includes exactly that. Note it under Where's what, ideally with a photo. Whether you actually turn them off when leaving is decided by the authorities' instructions in an emergency.

Variants for your household

Flat in an apartment building

- No lift during a fire or evacuation – plan your way down the stairs (BBK 2018, Canada).
- Know who in the building needs help, and talk to them in advance about their needs (Nuremberg, BABS). See the guide Helping your neighbours.
- If flooding threatens, move your car out of the underground car park in good time – it can become a death trap (BBK 2018).

House

- If flooding threatens, switch off the power to rooms at risk early (BBK) – even if you are not leaving yet.
- Never go into the cellar during a flood (BBK); move cars out of garages at risk (BBK 2018).
- Keep important documents outside the flood-risk area (BBK).

With children

- **Ask about the school's or nursery's emergency plan:** How does an evacuation work there, and where are the children taken? (Canada, FEMA)
- **Name two people** who may pick up your children if you can't, and register them there (Canada).
- **Involve children:** explain honestly what it is about, make the plan together, learn name, address and one phone number (Canada). Take children's worries seriously (BBK). More in the guide Children in a crisis.
- **ID for the child:** a neck pouch or SOS capsule with name, date of birth and address (BBK).
- **In the bag:** baby food, nappies, a cuddly toy, books or a game (Cologne, Hameln, Hannover).

With pets

- **Take them with you if you are evacuated** – the Canadian government calls this the most important step. During an evacuation you are not allowed back to look after animals (Nuremberg), and animals should not be left shut in at home (BABS).
- **Arrange somewhere for them in advance:** with relatives, friends, in a boarding kennel (Canada, BABS). Emergency shelters often don't allow pets, except guide, therapy and assistance dogs (Cologne); some towns allow animals in carriers (Hameln).
- **Keep ready:** carrier or lead, food, water and poo bags (Hameln).

- **Short, planned evacuations:** During a bomb disposal, animals are sometimes allowed to stay in the flat with food and water (Wiesbaden, Hameln) – the town will say so. If an animal has to stay behind, put out food and water and mark the rooms it is in (BABS).
- More in the guide People who need care, and pets.

With care needs or a disability

- **Think about what you need if you have to leave the house quickly** (BBK): mobility aids, glasses or hearing aids, spare batteries and chargers, medication schedule and supply, emergency contacts, emergency ID card; food and water for an assistance animal.
- **Know the escape routes** – and if you can't use them yourself: who will help you, and how? (BBK) If you live alone, arrange for someone to check on you in an emergency and help you leave (Canada).
- **Medication:** if possible, and after talking to your doctor, keep a supply for about two weeks (Canada).
- **For ordered evacuations, towns organise help and transport.** In Nuremberg, people affected or their relatives call the citizens' hotline and inform the care service; in Cologne you wait in your flat until the public order service rings and tell them that you need help and transport.
- **Communicating with emergency services:** pen and paper help; an emergency ID card shows how to communicate with you (BBK).

Without a car

- For planned evacuations there are often **free shuttle buses** to the emergency shelter – in Hameln step-free, also for wheelchairs, walkers and prams. You may also leave the area on foot, by bike or by public transport (Nuremberg).
- Write down which buses and trains get you to your destination (Hannover).
- Agree on **car-sharing** with colleagues, neighbours and friends – for you and your children (BABS).

With a car

- During an evacuation, park **outside the exclusion zone** (Hameln) or in a safe place (Hannover).
- **Never drive through flooded roads** (BBK 2018), avoid underpasses (BBK).

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Notgepäck", BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), BBK "Disasters Alarm" (12/2018), BABS emergency plan (10/2022), Government of Canada (9/2025), ReadyWisconsin, FEMA Family Communication Plan, City of Cologne, City of Nuremberg (9/2026), Hannover.de (1/2025), City of Hameln (4/2026), City of Wiesbaden.

IN AN EMERGENCY

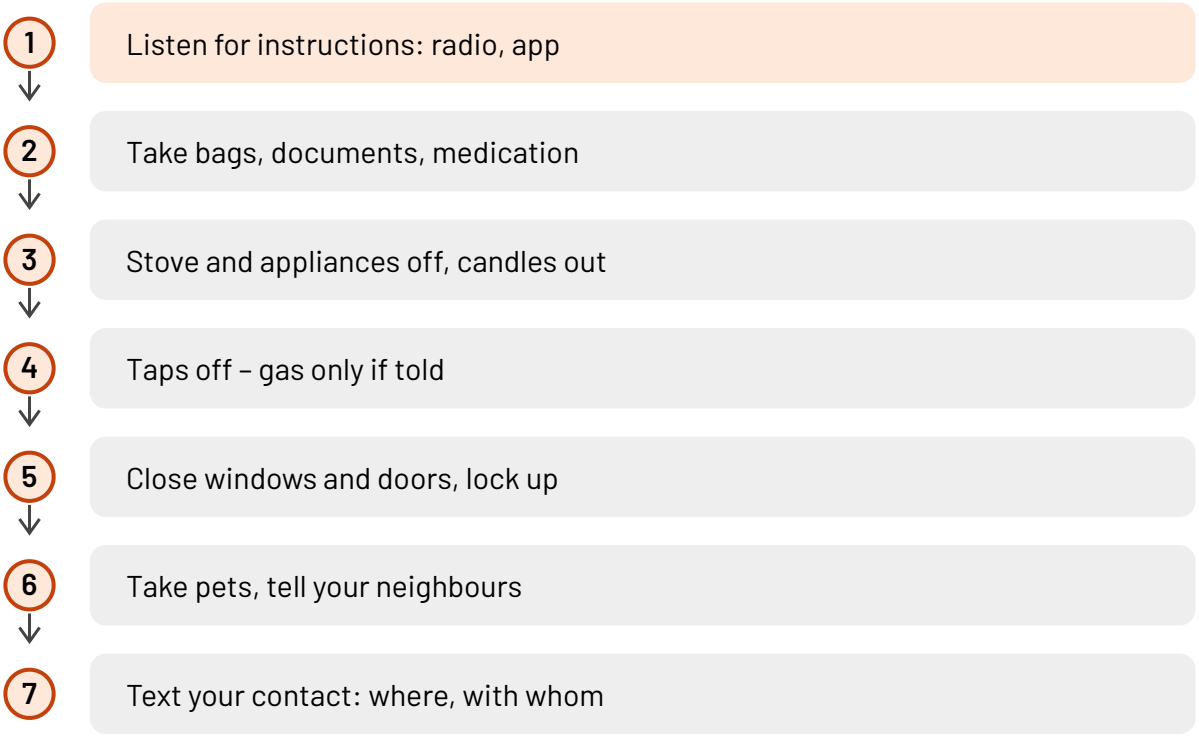
The short version is in emergency mode: Emergency – evacuation.

When the order comes: leaving your home

There is usually some time with an ordered evacuation – sometimes hours, sometimes minutes. What your town or the emergency services on site say always comes first.

1. **Listen for instructions:** radio, warning app, announcements, the town's website. By when do you have to be out, where is the emergency shelter, is there a citizens' hotline?
2. **Take emergency bags, documents and medication** – plus phone with charger and power bank, keys, money, glasses.
3. **Switch off the stove, oven, iron and other electrical and gas appliances, put out candles and open flames** (Hameln, Wiesbaden, BABS). Also switch off lights, motion sensors and light timers – otherwise emergency services checking the area may think someone is still inside (Hameln). If there is time, unplug appliances (Wisconsin).
4. **Turn off the taps** (Hameln, Wiesbaden, Hannover).
5. **Gas and electricity at the main only if instructed.** The authorities will tell you whether to turn utilities off or leave them connected (Canada). In Wiesbaden, for example, electricity and gas usually stay on during bomb disposals; other leaflets advise turning off the gas (BABS) or switching off gas, electricity and water completely (Hannover). **If flooding threatens,** switch off the power to rooms at risk early (BBK).
6. **Close windows and doors, lock up** (Nuremberg, Cologne, Wiesbaden) – unless the authorities say otherwise. In Hameln, for example, windows were to be left tilted open because of a possible controlled detonation.
7. **Take your pets** – with carrier, lead and food.
8. **Tell your neighbours:** Does everyone know? Does anyone need help because they are old, ill or have limited mobility? (Hannover, BABS)
9. **Tell your contact person:** a short text – where you are going, with whom. Also let your family know you are not at home (Hannover).
10. **Set off:** drive your car out of the exclusion zone, or go on foot, by bike or by shuttle bus. Follow barriers and the instructions of the emergency services.

LEAVING YOUR HOME



Leaving your home in seven steps: 1. listen for instructions on radio and warning app, 2. take bags, documents and medication, 3. stove and appliances off, candles out, 4. taps off – gas only if told, 5. close windows and doors and lock up, 6. take pets and tell your neighbours, 7. text your contact person where you are going and with whom.

This list is also in the family plan under "Before leaving home". Adapt it to your home – for example "cat into the carrier" or "fetch the walker from the cellar".

When you have to go at once: fire or gas in the building

Then there is no list, only the essentials (BBK):

1. Leave the room where the fire is if you can't put it out safely. If possible, close the windows and pull the door shut behind you – the fire gets less oxygen and the smoke stays out of the hallway.
2. Warn everyone in the household and take them with you.
3. Leave the building – **never through smoke-filled rooms or stairwells.** Just a few breaths of smoke can be fatal. If the way out is full of smoke, make yourself noticed at a window.
4. **Call 112** and warn your neighbours.
5. **Count heads at meeting point 1:** if someone is missing, tell the fire service immediately (BBK 2018).

In a fire, close the doors but **don't lock them** – that makes it easier for the fire service to search (BBK 2018). Always: don't put yourself in danger (BBK). More in the guide Fire at home.

If you are separated

1. **Get information:** radio or warning app. If your neighbourhood is closed off, don't go home – the area may not be entered once the evacuation has started (Nuremberg).
2. **Short text to the contact person:** who, where, where to.
3. **Go to the agreed meeting point:** meeting point 1 if the house can be reached; otherwise meeting point 2; if the town is evacuated, meeting point 3 or straight to the destination.
4. **Children at school or nursery:** the institution's emergency plan applies. The people you registered there may pick them up (Canada).
5. **If the network is down,** the paper plan applies. Nobody needs to be reachable for everyone to know where to go.

On the way

- **Follow the instructions and barriers of the emergency services** (BBK).
- **In a flood,** avoid flooded roads, riverbanks, underpasses and underground car parks (BBK).
- **Help others without putting yourself in danger;** bring children and older people to safety first (BBK).
- **Use 110 and 112 only in an emergency** – for questions there is usually a citizens' hotline (Hameln, Cologne). If the emergency numbers don't work, go to the nearest police station or hospital (BBK).

At the emergency shelter or care centre

If you can't stay with relatives or friends, you can go to one of the town's reception or care centres, often a school or a hall. The town announces where it is (Cologne, Hannover).

- **What to expect:** shelter from the weather, seating, simple places to sleep where possible, toilets, drinks and snacks, a hot meal during longer operations – and people to talk to, usually from aid organisations (Cologne, Nuremberg, Hameln).
- **What not to expect:** basic provision is limited; look after yourself as far as you can (Nuremberg). A blanket or sleeping bag helps (Hannover).
- **Forgot your medication?** Ask the helpers on site (Cologne).
- **Tell your contact person** where you are.
- **Look after yourself:** fear and uncertainty are normal in such a situation. It helps to talk to others, keep small routines, drink, eat and sleep enough, and follow only as much news as you need (BBK). In Germany, the TelefonSeelsorge helpline is available around the clock, free and anonymous if you wish: 0800 111 0 111, 0800 111 0 222 or 116 123. More in the guide Stress and anxiety in a crisis.

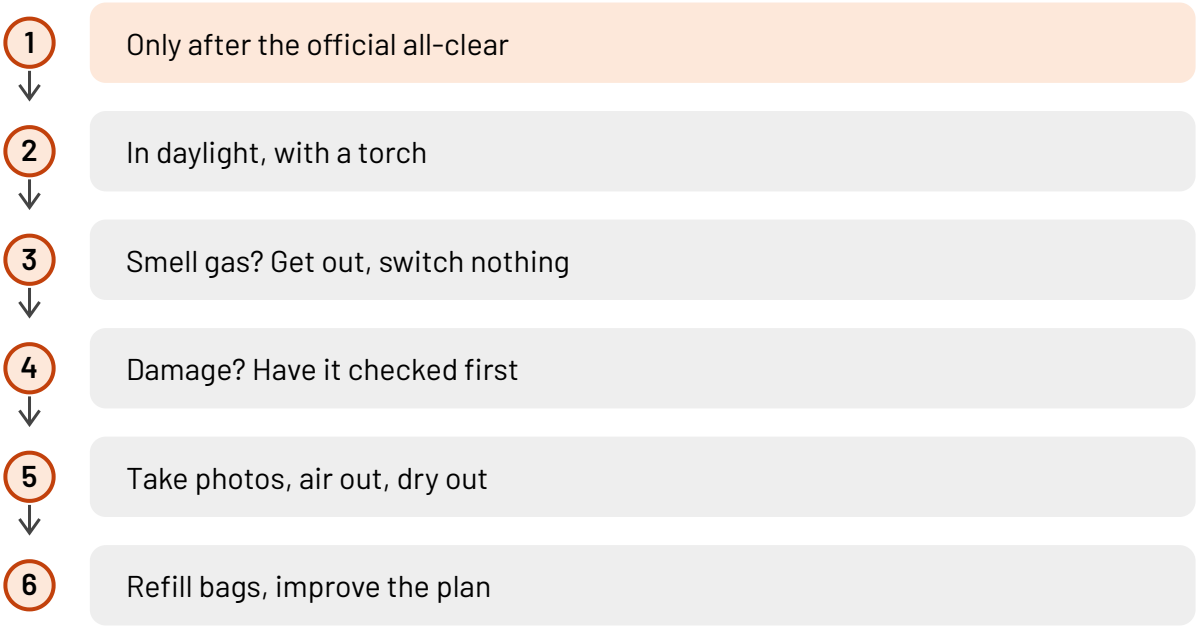
Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), BBK "Disasters Alarm" (12/2018), BABS emergency plan (10/2022), Government of Canada (9/2025), ReadyWisconsin, City of Cologne, City of Nuremberg (9/2026), Hannover.de (1/2025), City of Hameln (4/2026), City of Wiesbaden.

AFTERWARDS

Returning home

- **Only after the area is released.** You may only go back once the authorities release the area (Nuremberg, Hameln, Hannover). This is announced through loudspeaker announcements, the media and the town's website (Wiesbaden). Allow time: in Hameln in 2026, residents were told to expect, as a precaution, to return only in the evening.
- **Return in daylight,** with a torch rather than a candle (CDC).
- **Smell gas?** Get out again at once. No lights, no switches, nothing that could cause a spark. If it is safe, turn off the main gas valve and open the windows. Call the gas emergency service or fire service, and only go back in when they say so (CDC).
- **Visible damage to the building?** Only go in once a professional has checked it (CDC).
- **After a flood:** never switch electricity on or off while standing in water; have an electrician check the wiring before the power goes back on (CDC). Also have damaged structures and heating-oil tanks checked; if dangerous substances are leaking, call the fire service immediately (BBK).
- **Air it out:** if the house was shut up for several days, open windows and doors and let it air for at least 30 minutes before staying longer (CDC). Dry damp rooms quickly to prevent mould (BBK).
- **Document damage:** take photos before you tidy up – it helps with insurance (BBK).
- **Fridge and freezer:** if the power was off, check the food – see the guide Getting through a power cut.

RETURNING HOME SAFELY



Returning home safely: 1. only after the official all-clear, 2. in daylight with a torch, 3. if you smell gas, get out and switch nothing, 4. if there is damage, have it checked first, 5. take photos, air out, dry out, 6. refill bags and improve the plan.

Refill and improve

1. **Refill the emergency bags:** restock water, food, medication and batteries, charge the power bank.
2. **Sit down together while it's fresh:** What worked, what was missing, where did it get stuck?
3. **Update the plan:** new meeting points, numbers, a better route? Change it in the family plan, share it again by QR code and replace the printout in the emergency bag.

And then: go through the plan together **once a year** (FEMA) and practise in between – Drill suggests a round about every six months, from "evacuate in 10 minutes" to the "Meeting point" drill, where everyone finds their way to the agreed place without a phone.

Sources for this section: CDC "Reentering Your Flooded Home" (8/2026), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), City of Nuremberg (9/2026), City of Hameln (4/2026), Hannover.de (1/2025), City of Wiesbaden, FEMA Family Communication Plan.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Waiting to see whether it "really gets that bad"** although the authorities have called for an evacuation.
- **Having only one meeting point** – and it is inside the closed-off area.
- **Relying only on your phone:** no numbers on paper, no offline map, no printed plan.

- **Everyone calls everyone** instead of texting the contact person outside the region.
- **Taking the lift** during a fire or evacuation.
- **Walking or driving through smoke-filled stairwells or flooded roads.**
- **Packing the emergency bag only when the doorbell rings** – and then forgetting medication, glasses or the charger.
- **Not asking the school** how it handles emergencies and who it will hand the children to.
- **Leaving pets shut in at home** when the town hasn't said that is fine.
- **Turning off gas and electricity on your own initiative** – or missing an instruction to do so.
- **Forgetting neighbours** who can't get out on their own.
- **Going back too early,** before the area has been released.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Meeting point 1 right by the house, on your side of the street
- [ ] Meeting point 2 in the neighbourhood, reachable on foot
- [ ] Meeting point 3 outside town
- [ ] Main and alternative destination agreed (also: pets welcome?)
- [ ] Two routes per destination, in different directions, one on foot
- [ ] Routes marked on a paper map, walked or driven once
- [ ] Offline map of the region downloaded, meeting points on the map
- [ ] Contact person outside the region asked and entered
- [ ] Phone numbers on paper, in every wallet and emergency bag
- [ ] School or nursery emergency plan checked, two pick-up people registered
- [ ] Children know the meeting points, their name, address and one phone number
- [ ] One emergency bag per person, ready to go within half an hour
- [ ] Document folder ready to grab, digital copy saved
- [ ] Medication schedule and supply of medication
- [ ] Pets: carrier, lead, food, somewhere to stay arranged
- [ ] Care needs sorted: who helps whom to leave the house?
- [ ] Main water tap, fuse box, gas shut-off noted under "Where's what"
- [ ] Municipality's emergency meeting point known
- [ ] Warning app installed, battery or wind-up radio
- [ ] Plan printed, shared by QR code with every phone in the household
- [ ] Evacuation and meeting-point drills done, next date set

SOURCES

All links checked on 5 November 2026.

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CHAPTER 6

FIRST AID AND HOME MEDICINE CABINET

What to do in an emergency – check, call, push, recovery position, heavy bleeding, burns, shock – and what belongs in your home medicine cabinet. No substitute for a first aid course.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

In a crisis, ambulance services, doctors' surgeries and pharmacies are under heavy strain or temporarily out of reach. Then what counts is what you can do yourself and what you have at home: a few skills that save lives, and a well-stocked medicine cabinet. You can learn both in small steps.

> **No substitute for a first aid course.** This guide summarises what the German Red Cross (DRK), the German Resuscitation Council (GRC) and the German Federal Office of Civil Protection (BBK) recommend. But skills like chest compressions or the recovery position can only be learned by practising – ideally on a course, which takes a single day. In Germany you can find courses near you with the DRK, the ASB, the Johanniter and the Malteser. Elsewhere, ask your national Red Cross or Red Crescent society, St John or other local providers – in the UK, for example, the British Red Cross or St John Ambulance.

AT A GLANCE

- **Anyone can help.** In a cardiac arrest the first three to five minutes are decisive. The GRC puts it like this: all you need to save a life is two hands. And the DRK reassures you: you can't do anything wrong when you call – the dispatcher asks everything they need to know.
- **Check – call – push:** if someone doesn't respond, call **112 (Europe) or your local emergency number** straight away, put the phone on speaker and follow the instructions. If the person isn't breathing normally, push hard and fast in the centre of the chest straight away – 100 to 120 times a minute, 5 to 6 centimetres deep.
- **If they are breathing normally**, put them in the **recovery position** – so that vomit and blood can drain away and the tongue doesn't block the airway.
- **Heavy bleeding:** press firmly on the wound, then apply a pressure bandage. **Burns:** cool with cool to cold water, not icy water.
- **Medicine cabinet:** your personal medication for at least ten days, plus dressings, painkillers and fever reducers and a thermometer – stored somewhere cool, dry and out of children's reach. Your medication, allergies and emergency contacts belong in your Medical ID.

START SMALL

You don't have to know everything at once. Pick one of these small tasks each day – none takes longer than ten minutes, and most cost nothing:

- **Look for a course date:** check the providers above for the next first aid course near you. It usually takes one day. If your last course wasn't long ago, a refresher is often enough.
- **Fill in the Medical ID:** in the Medical ID, enter medication, allergies, medical conditions and emergency contacts for everyone in your household. Print it out and put it in your wallet.
- **Go through your medicine cabinet:** take everything out, sort out anything that has expired, put the rest back. Add whatever is missing to your shopping list.
- **Find the first aid kit:** where is it at home, where in the car? Does everyone in the household know where it is? Open it once and look at what's inside.
- **Numbers on paper:** 112 or your local emergency number, the police, the non-urgent medical helpline (in Germany 116 117, in the UK NHS 111), your poison control centre and your GP surgery. Keep the note with your medicine cabinet.
- **Sort out your medication supply:** write down which medicines you need regularly and how long your supply lasts. The BBK considers a supply for at least ten days sensible – ask your surgery how to build it up, and enter the expiry dates in your supplies.
- **Walk through the recovery position once:** with someone from your household, step by step following the illustration below. Very slowly – the point is just to have seen the order once.

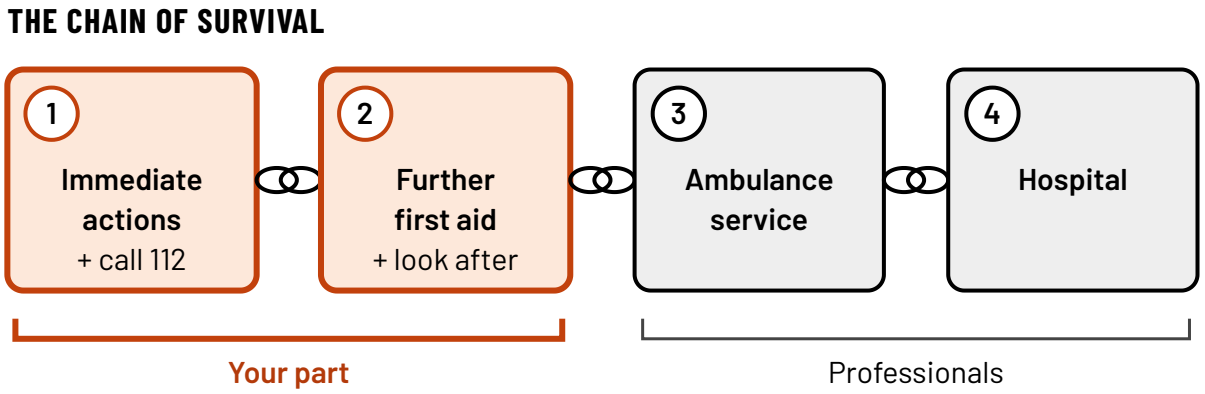
UNDERSTANDING

Why the first minutes count

In a cardiac arrest the heart stops pumping blood. Causes can be a heart attack, lack of oxygen (for example from respiratory arrest or poisoning), an electric shock or heavy blood loss (DRK). The European guidelines of 2025 therefore put the **first three to five minutes** at the centre: many people don't know that you must not wait for the ambulance (GRC). With chest compressions you pump blood through the body from the outside until professionals take over. They are by far the most important thing for survival (DRK 2026).

The chain of survival

The DRK describes help as a chain with four links: **immediate actions**, **further measures**, **ambulance service** and **hospital**. The first two links are the job of people like you: do what's needed until professionals arrive – and call them as quickly as possible. "Every chain is as strong as its weakest link," writes the DRK. According to the GRC, it is precisely the first links that are decisive.



A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Chain of survival with four links: 1. immediate actions and emergency call by first aiders, 2. further first aid until the ambulance arrives, 3. ambulance service, 4. hospital. The first two links are your part.

Unconscious – why it's dangerous

Someone who is unconscious doesn't respond to being spoken to clearly or to being gently shaken by the shoulders, and their muscles are slack. The DRK calls this acute danger to life: the protective reflexes are missing and the tongue can block the airway. That's what the **recovery position** is for: the mouth is the lowest point, vomit and blood can drain away, and the head tilted back keeps the airway open.

Normal and abnormal breathing

If an unconscious person isn't breathing normally, assume cardiac arrest. The DRK says explicitly: **unclear or gasping breathing is treated as no breathing.** If in doubt, also assume cardiac arrest (DRK). If you're unsure, the dispatcher on the phone will help you.

What the 2025 guidelines changed

The resuscitation guidelines are renewed every five years, most recently in October 2025 by the European Resuscitation Council (ERC). The GRC has translated them into German. For laypeople the main point is that chest compressions start **even earlier**. Since April 2026 the DRK has therefore advised putting these points into practice now:

- **Call straight away** if someone doesn't respond – you then check breathing with the help of the dispatcher.
- **Put the phone on speaker** so that your hands are free and you can follow the instructions.
- **You don't have to bare the chest.** Only if you can't feel the breastbone through the clothing do you move it aside.
- **Stay on the bed:** if the person is lying in bed, don't pull them onto the floor. Start right there and press deeper to make up for the soft mattress.
- **Take turns in pairs:** if there are at least two of you, swap every one to two minutes. Anyone else fetches a defibrillator.

The aid organisations' course materials are being updated at the moment. If you learn something slightly different on a course, that's not a contradiction: in an emergency, simply follow the dispatcher's instructions.

In a crisis: when help takes longer

The BBK points out that ambulance services, hospitals and pharmacies may be temporarily unavailable in a crisis. With a medicine cabinet you can then deal with minor emergencies yourself. For real emergencies there's still **112** – free throughout Germany and Europe, also from a mobile phone (BBK); outside Europe, use your local emergency number. For medical help that isn't life-threatening, Germany has the **medical on-call service 116 117** (DRK, BBK); in the UK, **NHS 111** advises you if you're unsure (NHS). For poisoning, call your poison control centre. Why you should only call the emergency number in a real emergency during a power cut is explained in the Power cut guide.

Sources for this section: GRC press release (22 Oct 2025), DRK circulars "Leitlinien zur Reanimation" (24 Nov 2025 and 27 Apr 2026), DRK "Rettungskette", "Bewusstlosigkeit", "Stabile Seitenlage", "Herzdruckmassage", "Notruf 112", BBK guide (11/2025), NHS "Burns and scalds".

PREPARING

Take a course

A first aid course is the best preparation in this guide. At the DRK the basic course takes one day (9 teaching units) and needs no previous knowledge. You learn to protect yourself and secure an accident scene, wound care, help with broken bones, burns, heat and cold injuries, poisoning – and above all the recovery position and resuscitation, with lots of practical exercises.

- **Where:** in Germany, the DRK, ASB, Johanniter and Malteser offer courses, mostly with a search by postcode or town (links above). Elsewhere: your Red Cross society, St John or other local providers. The British Red Cross also offers a free first aid workshop for adults.
- **How often:** the Johanniter recommend refreshing your knowledge every two to three years at the latest. The BBK simply says: if your last course was a while ago, refresh it.
- **Short and modular:** the DRK offers "Fit in Erster Hilfe" in single 90-minute modules – for anyone whose course was a long time ago.
- **Special courses:** first aid for children, for older people and – at the ASB – first aid for dogs. Some organisations offer courses in easy-to-read language or German Sign Language; you can also ask about courses for blind and visually impaired people (BBK).
- **Free, with civil protection content:** the BBK funds free courses "Erste Hilfe mit Selbstschutzinhalten" (first aid with self-protection content) throughout Germany – ask your local aid organisations.
- **To look up:** the BBK links to simple instructions for chest compressions at wiederbelebung.de (in German).

What belongs in the medicine cabinet

The BBK recommends a medicine cabinet tailored to your personal needs. This is the list from the BBK checklist – you probably have much of it already:

Medicines

- Personal medication (for example an asthma inhaler)
- Painkillers and fever reducers
- Remedies for diarrhoea, vomiting and nausea
- Remedies for cold symptoms, decongestant nose drops or nasal spray
- Electrolytes to replace lost fluids

For wounds and injuries

- Wound and skin disinfectant
- Plasters and dressings (compresses, gauze bandages)
- Burn dressing
- Disposable gloves
- Cold pack
- Tweezers and scissors
- Burn, wound and healing ointment

Other

- Thermometer
- Remedies for sunburn and insect bites
- Decongestant, cooling gel for minor sports injuries

Which products exactly is best discussed with your pharmacy or doctor. A **first aid kit** contains the dressings ready assembled – handy if you don't want to buy everything separately (BBK). Under "Other", the BBK also lists a **respirator mask** to protect against viruses, bacteria and hazardous substances in the air. The DRK mentions an (emergency) blanket for keeping warm in hypothermia.

HOME MEDICINE CABINET

Medicines	Wounds	Other
Your own, 10 days	Disinfectant	Thermometer
Painkillers	Plasters, bandages	For sunburn
Fever reducers	Compresses	For insect bites
For diarrhoea	Burn dressing	Cooling gel
For nausea	Disposable gloves	
For colds	Tweezers, scissors	
Nasal spray	Cold pack	
Electrolytes	Wound, burn ointment	

Cool, dry, out of children's reach – not the bathroom

Medicine cabinet after the BBK checklist in three groups: medicines (personal medication, painkillers and fever reducers, remedies for diarrhoea and nausea, for colds, electrolytes), wound care (disinfectant, plasters and bandages, burn dressing, disposable gloves, tweezers and scissors, cold pack) and other (thermometer, remedies for sunburn and insect bites, gel for sports injuries). Cool, dry, lockable, not in the bathroom.

Personal medication: at least ten days

If you need medication regularly, the BBK says you should have a **supply for at least ten days** – keep shelf life and storage in mind. How you get this supply is something to sort out with your surgery and pharmacy. It goes together with a **medication plan**: which medicine, when, how much. Copy it out or have it printed for you.

If you have to leave home, personal medication and first aid supplies belong in your emergency bag. That's especially important if you have to stay somewhere else for a while or have less access to medical care (BBK). More in the Emergency bag guide.

Storing and checking

- **Child-safe:** lockable or high enough that children can't reach it (BBK).
- **Cool and dry:** in a room that isn't heated much. **The bathroom is the wrong place** (BBK).
- **Check regularly:** replace what has been used up. Sort out expired medicines – they can lose their effect or become harmful. According to the BBK they can go in the household waste (local rules may differ outside Germany).
- **A fixed date helps**, for example once a year on the nationwide warning day in September. Enter the expiry dates in your supplies and you'll get a reminder.

Medical ID and medication list

Rescuers need important information quickly. According to the BBK, an emergency card can list illnesses, allergies, aids and emergency contacts – and also how someone communicates best with rescuers. In Bereitsein you create it under Medical ID: for each person with medication, allergies, medical conditions, implants and emergency contacts. The data stays on your device. Print the card and carry it – paper works even when the phone is flat. Many smartphones can also show a medical ID that opens even when the screen is locked (BBK).

Variations for your household

- **With children:** always lock medicines away or store them high up. There are separate rules for resuscitating children (see "In an emergency") – the safest way to learn them is a first aid course for children. When cooling burns, take care with babies and toddlers because they cool down quickly (DRK). How to teach children the emergency number in a playful way is in the Children in a crisis guide.
- **Older people and people who need care:** the BBK recommends a medication plan with a supply, spares for aids such as glasses or hearing aids, spare batteries, a list of emergency contacts and an emergency card. If someone in bed needs resuscitation, press on the bed – just deeper (DRK 2026). The DRK offers a dedicated first aid course for older people. More in the People who need care, and pets guide.
- **With a hearing or speech impairment:** in Germany, the official emergency app **nora** lets you make an emergency call without speaking (BBK). Best set it up now, not in an emergency.
- **With a dog:** the ASB offers first aid courses for dogs. This guide contains no instructions for animals.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025, pp. 8–9, 20–21, 33), BBK "Hausapotheke", BBK "Erste Hilfe und Notruf", DRK "Rotkreuzkurs Erste Hilfe", "Verbrennungen", "Erfrierungen und Unterkühlungen", DRK circular (27 Apr 2026), Johanniter "Erste Hilfe", ASB "Erste Hilfe", Malteser "Erste-Hilfe-Kurse", British Red Cross "Unresponsive and not breathing".

IN AN EMERGENCY

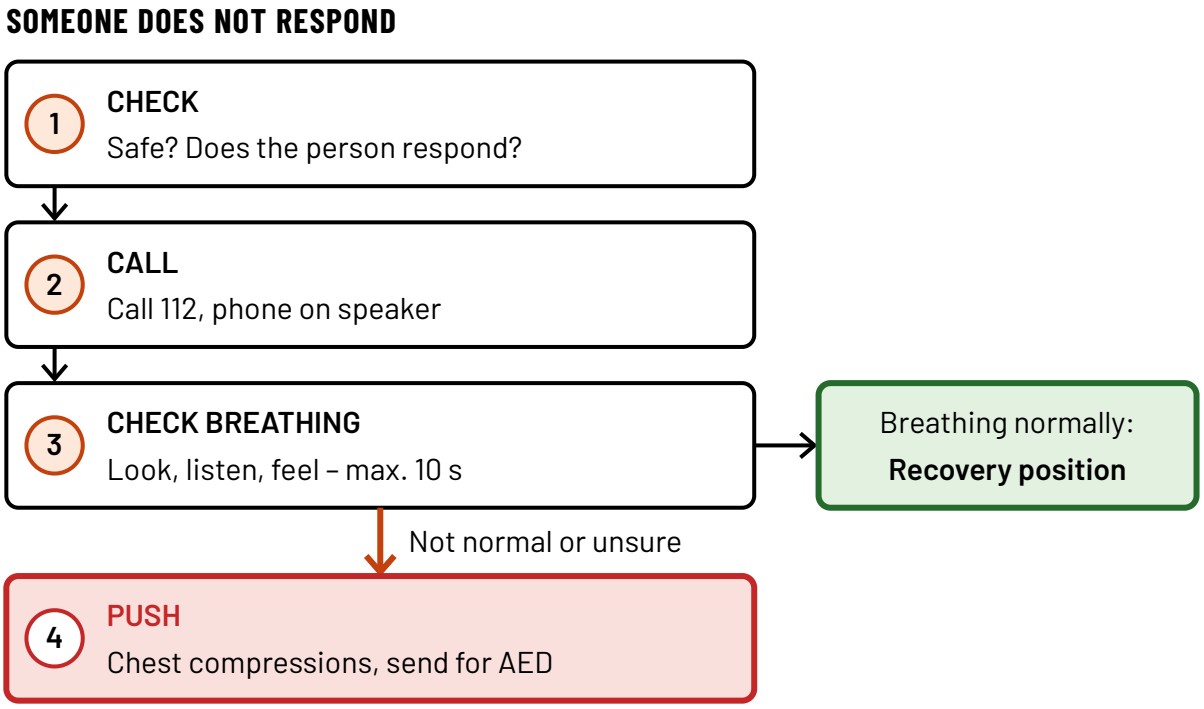
First: stay calm, get an overview, protect yourself

1. **Assess the situation:** what has happened? What dangers threaten the person – and you? Think of your own safety first, for example approaching cars or a fire that is spreading (DRK).
2. **Secure the scene:** if necessary, secure the danger area. At a road accident, secure the scene first, then get injured people out of the danger zone (BBK).
3. **Gloves:** put on disposable gloves from the first aid kit – the DRK mentions protective gloves for example with burns and hypothermia.
4. **Involve helpers:** if others are there, share the tasks: one person calls, another starts first aid, a third fetches a defibrillator (BBK, DRK).

Someone doesn't respond: check – call – push

This is the sequence according to the 2025 guidelines, as recommended by the DRK since April 2026:

1. **Check:** is it safe to approach? Is the person conscious? Speak to them loudly and gently shake their shoulders.
2. **Call:** if they don't respond, shout for help and **call 112 (Europe) or your local emergency number straight away** – or have someone call. Put the phone on speaker and follow the instructions.
3. **Check breathing:** tilt the head back and lift the chin. Then look, listen, feel: does the chest rise and fall? Can you hear breathing? Can you feel air on your cheek? For no more than ten seconds (DRK). If you're unsure, the dispatcher will help.
4. **If they're breathing normally:** put them in the **recovery position**, cover them, calm them, look after them and check consciousness and breathing again and again until the ambulance arrives.
5. **If they're not breathing normally – or you're in doubt: push.** Start chest compressions straight away. Unclear or gasping breathing counts as no breathing.



Sequence when someone doesn't respond: 1. Check – safe? does the person respond? 2. Call – call 112, phone on speaker. 3. Check breathing, no more than 10 seconds. Breathing normally: recovery position. Not breathing normally or unsure: 4. Push – chest compressions, send someone for an AED.

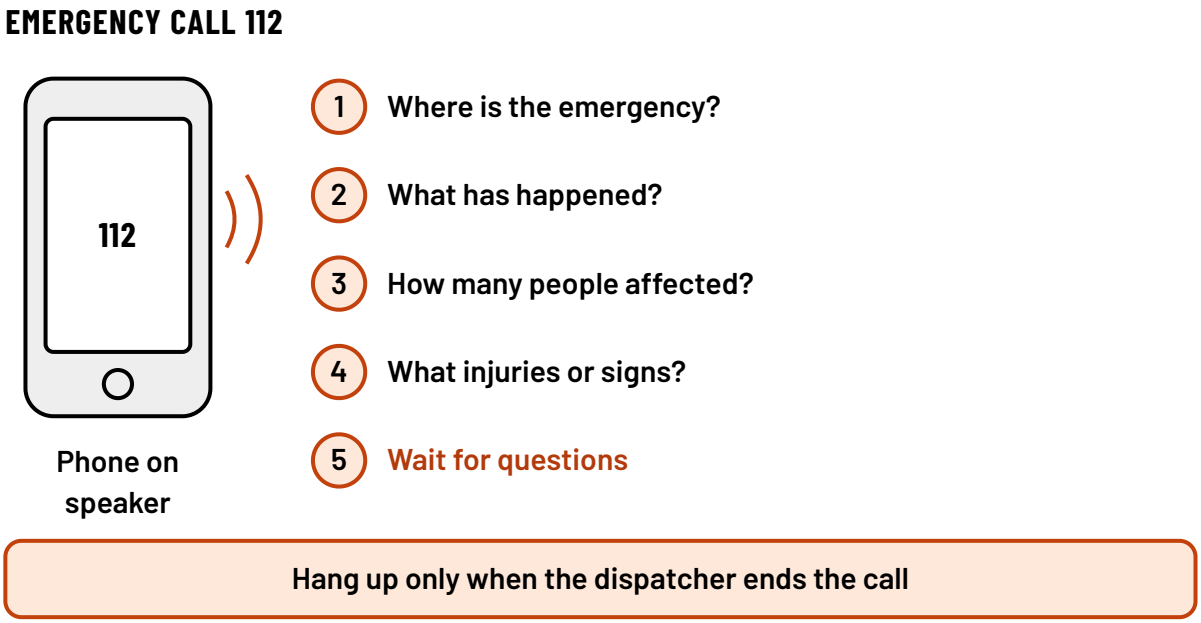
The emergency call

Speak calmly. The dispatcher asks everything they need – you don't have to prepare anything. The DRK lists these questions:

1. **Where is the emergency?** As precisely as possible: town, street, house number, building, access, floor.

2. **What has happened?**
3. **How many people** are affected?
4. **What injuries or signs of illness** do they have? Is anyone unconscious, is anyone's life in danger?
5. **Wait for questions:** only hang up when the dispatcher has all the important information and ends the call.

The BBK also lists: **who is calling?** The dispatcher can guide you through first aid on the phone, including resuscitation (DRK). In Germany and throughout Europe, 112 is free, also from a mobile phone. If the place is hard to find, someone guides the ambulance crew in (BBK).



Emergency call 112: the dispatcher asks 1. Where is the emergency? 2. What has happened? 3. How many people affected? 4. What injuries or signs? 5. Wait for questions – only hang up when the dispatcher ends the call. Put the phone on speaker.

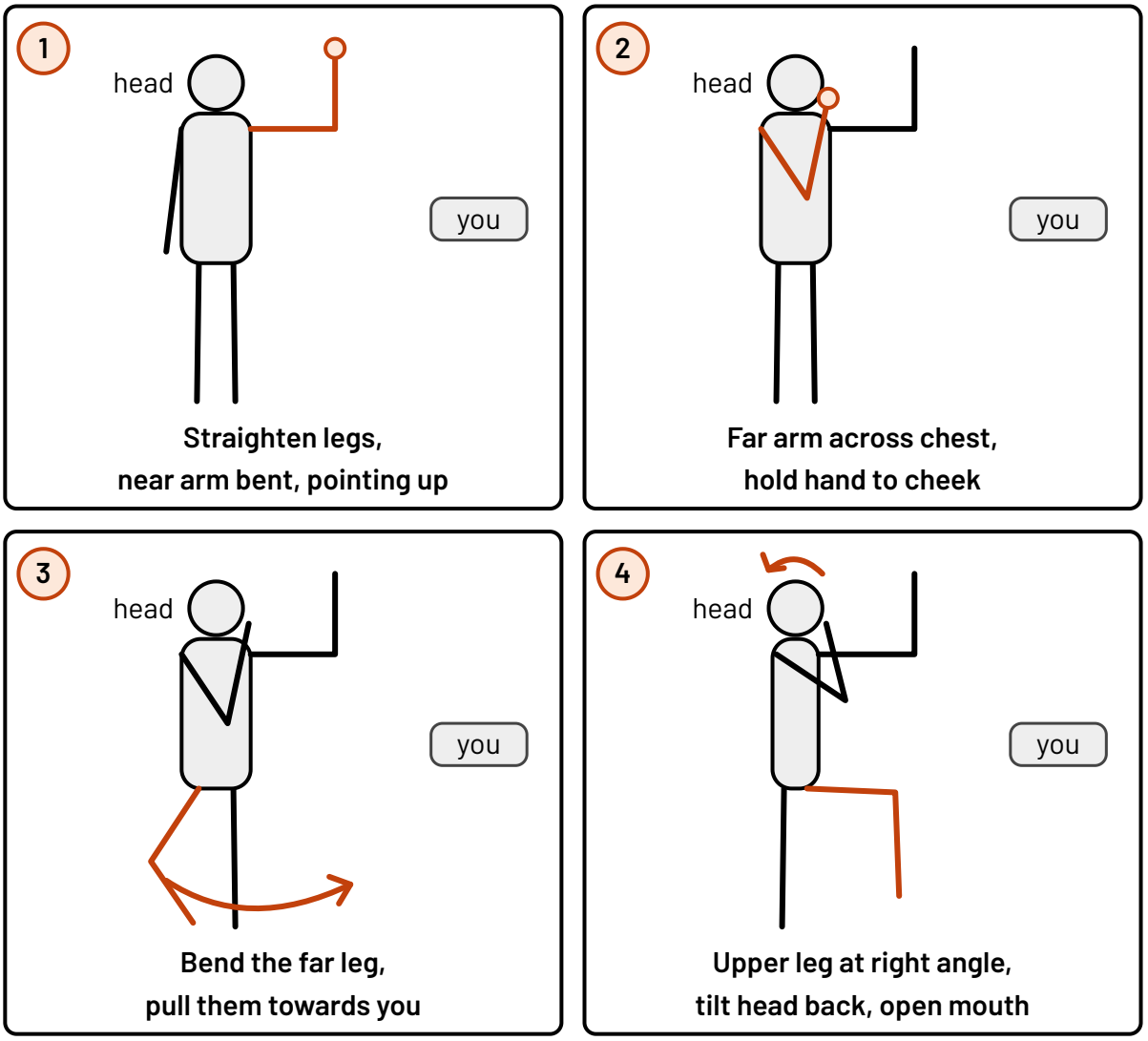
The recovery position

For people who are unconscious but breathing normally. This is how the DRK describes it:

1. **Prepare:** kneel beside the person. Straighten their legs. Place the arm nearest to you at a right angle, pointing upwards – palm facing up.
2. **Far arm across the chest:** take the arm furthest from you by the wrist. Bring it across the chest and place the back of the hand against the person's cheek. **Don't let go of the hand.**
3. **Bend the far leg and roll:** with your other hand, take hold of the far thigh and bend the leg. Then pull the person towards you by this leg, onto their side.
4. **Adjust:** position the upper leg so that the thigh is at a right angle to the hip. Tilt the head back so the airway is open, and open the mouth slightly. Adjust the hand at the cheek so that the head stays tilted back.

Afterwards: cover them, look after them and keep **checking consciousness and breathing**. The mouth should stay the lowest point. If the person stops breathing normally, start chest compressions straight away (DRK).

RECOVERY POSITION

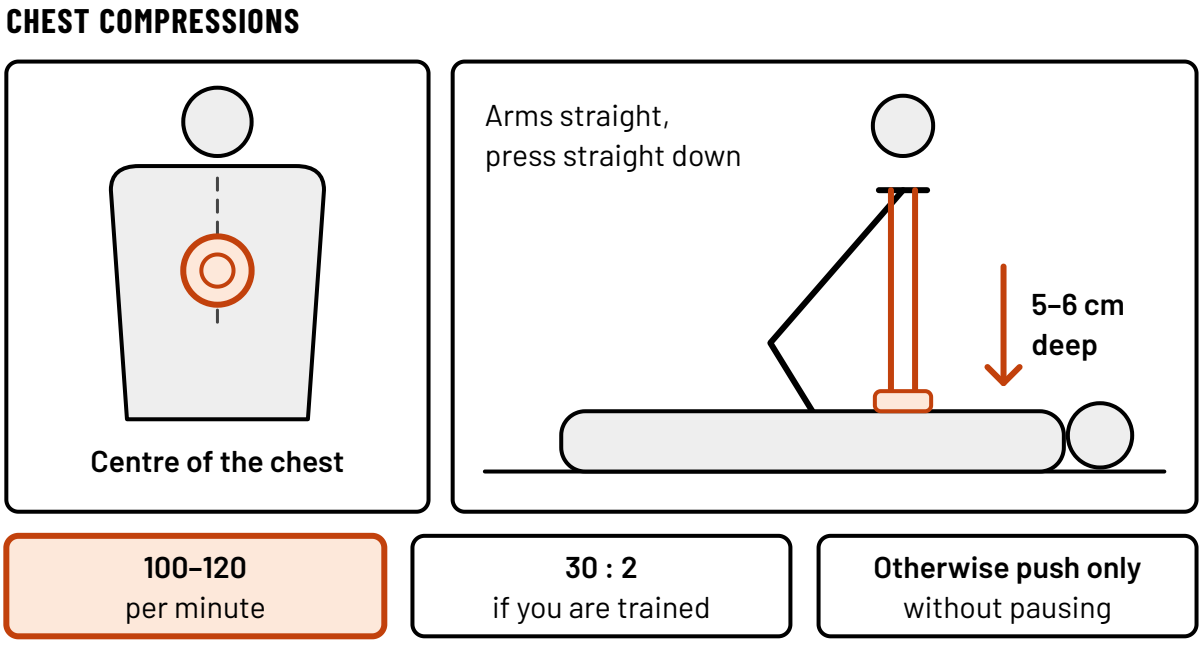


Recovery position in four steps, seen from above: 1. Kneel beside the person, straighten the legs, near arm up at a right angle. 2. Far arm across the chest, back of the hand against the cheek and hold it there. 3. Bend the far leg and pull the person towards you. 4. Upper leg at a right angle, tilt the head back, open the mouth slightly.

Chest compressions

1. **Position:** kneel beside the person, level with the chest. They lie on their back, ideally on a firm surface – but if they're in bed, they stay in bed (DRK 2026).
2. **Hands:** place the heel of one hand in the **centre of the chest** (the lower third of the breastbone), the heel of the other hand on top (DRK). You only need to move clothing aside if you can't feel the breastbone.

3. **Push:** arms straight, shoulders vertically above the chest, pressure from your upper body. **5 to 6 centimetres deep**, **100 to 120 times a minute**. Let the chest come all the way back up after each push; pushing and releasing take the same time (DRK).
4. **Give rescue breaths if you're trained:** after 30 compressions give two breaths – tilt the head back, lift the chin, pinch the nose, blow in for about one second each until the chest rises. Then 30 compressions again: **30 : 2** in turn (DRK).
5. **Otherwise just push:** if you haven't learned rescue breaths or don't feel able to give them, simply keep pushing without a break (DRK "Prüfen – Rufen – Drücken", Resuscitation Council UK). Chest compressions are what matters most.
6. **Take turns:** if there are two of you, swap every one to two minutes (DRK 2026).
7. **Keep going** until the person breathes normally again or the ambulance crew takes over (DRK).



Chest compressions: heel of the hand in the centre of the chest, the other hand on top, arms straight. 5 to 6 centimetres deep, 100 to 120 times a minute. 30 compressions, 2 rescue breaths if you're trained – otherwise just push without a break.

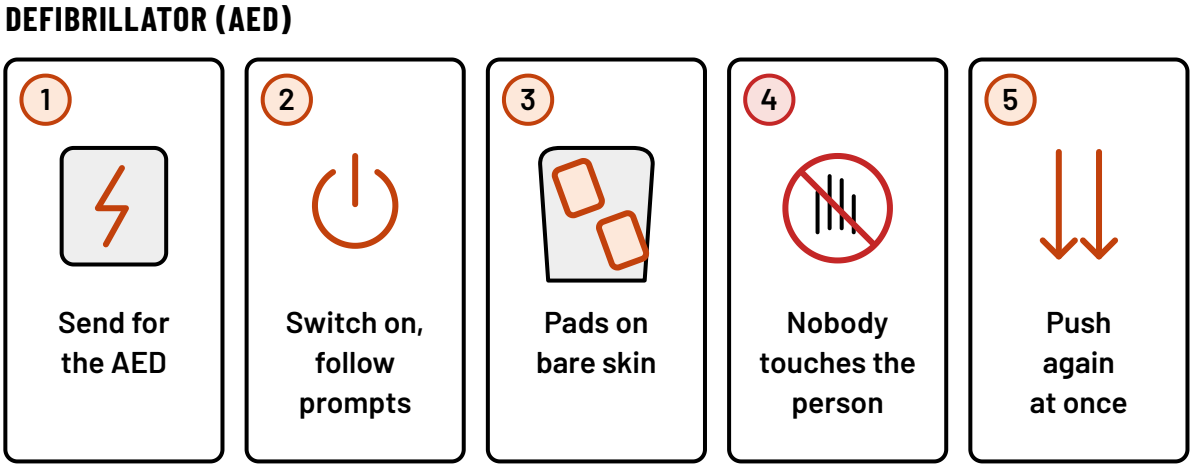
The defibrillator (AED)

An automated external defibrillator (AED) analyses the heart rhythm and delivers an electric shock if needed. **Anyone can use one**, no training is needed (Resuscitation Council UK). The device tells you every step.

1. **Send for it:** ask someone else to fetch an AED. If you're alone, don't interrupt resuscitation to get one (DRK).
2. **Switch it on** and follow the voice prompts.
3. **Stick the pads on bare skin**, as shown on the device. If there are two of you, one keeps pushing while the other attaches the pads (Resuscitation Council UK).

4. **Nobody touches the person** while the device analyses the heart rhythm and delivers a shock (Resuscitation Council UK).
5. **Start pushing again straight away** after the shock – or if the device doesn't advise a shock (Resuscitation Council UK).

For children aged 1 to 8, child pads are used (DRK).



Children aged 1 to 8: child pads

Defibrillator in five steps: 1. Send someone for the AED, keep pushing. 2. Switch on, follow the prompts. 3. Pads on bare skin. 4. Nobody touches the person during analysis and shock. 5. Start pushing again at once.

Children and babies

According to the DRK, there are some differences for children. The safest way to learn them is a first aid course for children; German course materials are currently being updated to the 2025 guidelines.

- **Breaths first:** before chest compressions, give up to **five rescue breaths**, because children's airways are more easily blocked by foreign objects. If breathing for them isn't possible, just push.
- **Then 30 : 2**, 100 to 120 times a minute, on the lower third of the breastbone.
- **Babies** (up to the end of the first year): with two fingertips, about 4 centimetres deep.
- **Children** (up to the visible start of puberty): with the heel of one or both hands, about 5 centimetres deep – a third to half the depth of the chest.
- **Alone?** After about one minute of resuscitation, stop and call the emergency number if nobody has done so yet.

Heavy bleeding

Almost any bleeding can be stopped with enough pressure from outside (DRK). In adults, losing about one litre of blood can already be life-threatening, in children sooner.

1. **Lie them down:** always stop bleeding with the person lying down (DRK).

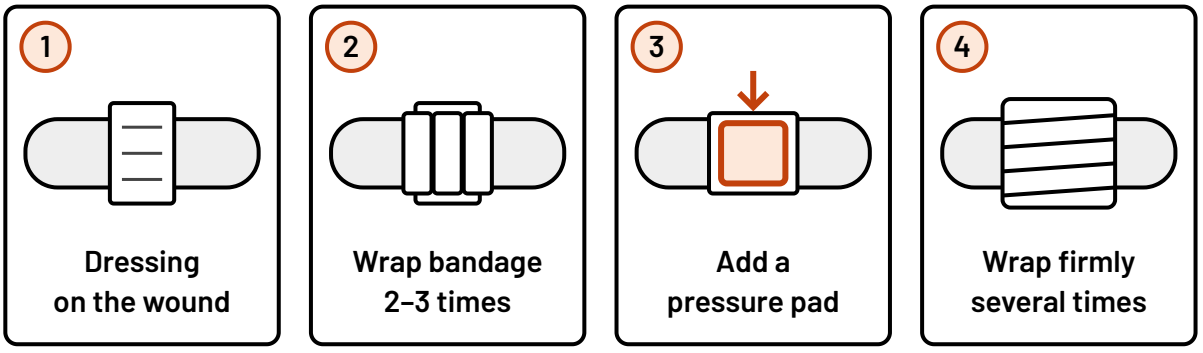
2. **Press:** press low-germ material – a compress, an opened dressing pack, if need be a clean cloth – firmly onto the wound, into it if necessary. Stopping the bleeding comes first; you accept a possible infection (DRK).
3. **Raise:** hold up the arm or leg if possible (or have it held up).
4. **Call the emergency number** if life is in danger – or have someone call while you press.
5. **Apply a pressure bandage** if the wound is on an arm or leg (see below). On the head or trunk only if the location allows – otherwise keep pressing until the ambulance crew takes over (DRK).
6. **If it bleeds through:** don't remove it, put a fresh layer on top and keep pressing firmly (British Red Cross).
7. **Prevent shock:** cover them, calm them, comfort them (DRK, see "Shock").

Pressure bandage in four steps (BBK):

1. Place a **compress** on the wound.
2. Wrap a **gauze bandage two or three times** around the compress.
3. Put a **pressure pad** on the spot where the wound is – for example an unopened dressing pack or a pack of gauze bandages.
4. **Wrap the bandage around the pressure pad several times** and fix the end with a plaster.

Bandaged limbs should be raised (DRK).

PRESSURE BANDAGE IN 4 STEPS



Then raise the arm or leg.

Bleeding through: add a layer, keep pressing.

Pressure bandage in four steps: 1. Compress on the wound. 2. Wrap the gauze bandage around two or three times. 3. Put a pressure pad, for example a dressing pack, on the wound. 4. Wrap firmly several times and fix. Then raise the arm.

Nosebleeds: lean the head slightly forward, let the person rest their forehead in their hands, put a cold compress on the back of the neck. If the bleeding is heavy or doesn't stop, call the emergency number (DRK).

Shock

Shock means the body is no longer getting enough blood – for example after bleeding, from fluid loss or great fear (DRK). **Signs:** at first restlessness, fear and nervousness, pale, cold, often sweaty skin, feeling cold and shivering; later calm, apathy, possibly unconsciousness.

1. **Call the emergency number.**
2. **Speak to them** and gently shake their shoulders.
3. **If conscious:** lie them down, **raise their legs**, cover them. This lets blood flow to the brain and organs.
4. **Avoid agitation**, shield the person from onlookers if needed, calm them, comfort them, look after them.
5. **Unconscious, breathing normally:** recovery position. **Not breathing normally:** chest compressions.

Burns

1. **Protect yourself:** think of your own safety first, put on gloves. Move the person away from the source of heat and calm them.
2. **Call the emergency number** – the DRK generally recommends medical care for burns.
3. **Cool:** for at least 20 minutes with **cool to cold, but not icy water**. No ice. The NHS also says 20 minutes of cool running water.
4. **Careful when cooling:** with large burns and with babies and toddlers there is a risk of hypothermia. On the face, cool only with damp cloths; the airway must stay clear.
5. **Clothing:** carefully remove burning clothing. Anything stuck to the skin stays where it is.
6. **Don't open, don't smear:** don't open blisters. No home remedies.
7. **Cover:** loosely with a sterile dressing (for example the burn dressing) or with cling film – don't wrap tightly.
8. **Keep warm** and watch for signs of shock.

This is how the DRK describes it. Remember above all: **no ice, no home remedies, don't let them get too cold.** If in doubt, ask the dispatcher.

DO	DON'T
✓ Water: cool to cold	✗ Ice or ice water
✓ DRK: at least 20 min	✗ Home remedies
✓ Cover loosely, sterile	✗ Opening blisters
✓ Keep warm, call 112	✗ Pulling off stuck cloth

Large burn or small child: risk of hypothermia

Cooling a burn: cool with cool to cold water, not icy, according to the DRK for at least 20 minutes. Don't: ice, home remedies, opening blisters. Then cover loosely and sterile, keep warm. Large burns or small children: careful, risk of hypothermia.

Hypothermia

This can matter especially during a power cut in winter (see Keeping warm without heating). The DRK distinguishes two stages:

- **If the person is shivering, agitated or restless:** call the emergency number. Bring them somewhere warm and warm them up slowly, take off wet clothing, wrap them in warm blankets or an emergency blanket. Warm, sweetened drinks such as tea only if they are conscious. No alcohol.
- **If their breathing slows, their muscles stiffen, they get more and more drowsy:** call the emergency number. Now **stop actively warming them** – no rubbing, no hot-water bottle. Cover them, recovery position if unconscious, check breathing again and again. If they aren't breathing normally: chest compressions.

When the ambulance takes longer

In a crisis it can take a while for help to arrive. Then:

- **Don't stop.** Keep up resuscitation until the person breathes normally again or the ambulance crew takes over. Take turns if there are two of you. If you're pressing on a wound: keep pressing.
- **Use the dispatcher:** they can guide you through first aid on the phone (DRK).
- **Non-urgent medical help:** 116 117 in Germany, NHS 111 in the UK, or your local equivalent.
- **Have the Medical ID and medication ready:** card, medication plan and the packs of the medicines the person takes, ready to hand for the ambulance crew.

- **Look after them:** stay with them, cover them, speak calmly. For almost every emergency the DRK says the same: calm, look after, comfort, observe.

In emergency mode you'll find the most important steps under Emergency.

Sources for this section: DRK "Auffinden einer Person", "Bewusstlosigkeit", "Prüfen – Rufen – Drücken", "Herz-Lungen-Wiederbelebung", "Wiederbelebung bei Kindern und Säuglingen", "Stabile Seitenlage", "Notruf 112", "Blutungen", "Druckverband", "Schock", "Verbrennungen", "Erfrierungen und Unterkühlungen"; DRK circular (27 Apr 2026); BBK guide (11/2025, p. 21); BBK "Erste Hilfe und Notruf"; Resuscitation Council UK (10/2025); St John Ambulance "CPR" (9/2026); British Red Cross "Bleeding heavily"; NHS "Burns and scalds" (3/2026).

AFTERWARDS

Handing over and catching your breath

- **Hand over:** give the ambulance crew the Medical ID and medication plan; if going to hospital, take your own medicines with you (NHS).
- **Look after yourself:** resuscitation or a serious accident can stay with you for a while afterwards. That's normal. Talk to someone about it – support helps (Resuscitation Council UK). More in the Stress and anxiety in a crisis guide.

Restocking

1. Note what you used: gloves, compresses, bandages, burn dressing, emergency blanket.
2. Add it to your shopping list and buy it again soon – including for the first aid kit in the car.
3. Check opened medicines and bring your supply of personal medication back up to at least ten days.
4. Update the Medical ID if medication or allergies have changed.

Learning from it

What worked, where were you unsure? Did everyone know where the first aid kit was? Did the emergency call get through? Usually the best answer is: take a course or refresh one. After that, the next emergency feels very different.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Doing nothing for fear of doing something wrong:** you can't do anything wrong when you call, and the dispatcher will help you on the phone.
- **Calling too late:** if someone doesn't respond, call the emergency number straight away – phone on speaker.
- **Mistaking gasping for breathing:** unclear or gasping breathing counts as no breathing.

- **Pushing too gently:** 5 to 6 centimetres deep, 100 to 120 times a minute, and let go fully after each push.
- **Stopping to fetch a defibrillator yourself:** if you're alone, keep pushing; send others.
- **Pulling the person out of bed:** stay on the bed and press deeper.
- **Using ice or home remedies on burns, opening blisters:** only water, cool to cold, not icy.
- **Showering small children or large burns with cold water for a long time:** risk of hypothermia.
- **Removing a bandage that has bled through:** add a fresh layer, keep pressing.
- **Keeping the medicine cabinet in the bathroom:** too warm and too damp.
- **Keeping expired medicines:** they can lose their effect or become harmful.
- **Never refreshing your course:** every two to three years at the latest.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] First aid course done or booked
- [ ] Refresher in the calendar (every 2–3 years at the latest)
- [ ] Medical ID filled in and printed for each person
- [ ] Medication plan on paper
- [ ] Personal medication for at least 10 days
- [ ] Painkillers and fever reducers, thermometer
- [ ] Remedies for diarrhoea, vomiting and nausea, electrolytes
- [ ] Remedies for colds, nose drops or nasal spray
- [ ] Wound and skin disinfectant
- [ ] Plasters, compresses, gauze bandages, burn dressing
- [ ] Disposable gloves, tweezers, scissors, cold pack
- [ ] Remedies for sunburn and insect bites, gel for sports injuries
- [ ] First aid kit at home and in the car, everyone knows where
- [ ] First aid supplies and medication in the emergency bag
- [ ] Medicine cabinet cool, dry, child-safe – not in the bathroom
- [ ] Expiry dates checked once a year (for example on the warning day)
- [ ] Numbers on paper: emergency number, police, non-urgent medical help, poison centre, GP
- [ ] If needed: emergency app for calling without speaking set up
- [ ] Know where the nearest defibrillator is

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CHAPTER 7

FLOODS AND HEAVY RAIN

How to recognise your risk, read warnings and hazard maps, protect your home and cellar, act when the water rises – and what to watch out for afterwards.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

DO NOW

1. Take warnings seriously – radio, warning app, river levels
2. Keep out of cellars, underground car parks and underpasses once water comes
3. Switch off power to rooms at risk – only if you are standing somewhere dry
4. Do not walk or drive through flooded streets
5. Go upstairs, keep your emergency bag ready; call 112 if lives are in danger

Floods don't only happen on big rivers. **Heavy rain** can flood streets, cellars and underpasses anywhere in a short time – even far away from any stream or river. The good news: what protects lives in an emergency is simple. Stay out of the cellar. Stay out of the water. Go upstairs in time. And a lot of what keeps the damage small, you can prepare calmly in advance.

AT A GLANCE

- **Two kinds of flooding:** On larger rivers, a flood usually announces itself hours to days in advance. Heavy rain is local, hard to predict precisely and often leaves very little time.
- **Know your risk:** Your federal state's flood hazard map shows river flooding; a heavy-rain hazard map (usually from your town) shows flooding caused by rain. A blank spot on the map does not mean water can't get there.
- **Stay out of the cellar once water gets in:** The door often can't be opened from the inside any more, and there is a risk of a fatal electric shock. Avoid underground car parks, underground stations and underpasses too.
- **Switch off the power early** to rooms that water could reach – but only if you are standing somewhere dry.
- **Never walk or drive through floodwater:** Just 15 cm of fast-flowing water can knock a person off their feet, and 30 cm of moving water can float a car.
- **Go upstairs – or leave if the authorities tell you to.** Higher floors and higher ground give the best protection.
- **Afterwards:** only go back in when it is safe; take photos before you clean up; have the electrics and heating checked by professionals; dry everything quickly.

START SMALL

You don't have to buy sandbags or rebuild your cellar today. Pick one of these tasks each day – none takes more than ten minutes, and almost all of them are free:

- **Look at the hazard map:** Search for "Hochwassergefahrenkarte" and your federal state, enter your address – and ask your town for a **heavy-rain hazard map** (Starkregengefahrenkarte). Keep a printout or screenshot with your papers.
- **Set up warnings:** Under Warnings, choose the districts where you live and work – official flood warnings appear there too. Is there a radio with batteries or a crank in the house?
- **Where's what:** At the fuse box, check which fuses supply the cellar and ground floor. Note the fuse box, main water tap and gas shut-off valve under Where's what, with a photo.
- **Cellar walk-round:** What down there must not get wet – documents, photos, electrical appliances, chemicals? Take one thing upstairs. The document folder never belongs in the cellar.
- **Backflow protection:** Is there a backflow valve, and when was it last serviced? If you rent: ask your landlord.
- **Read your insurance:** Does your contents or buildings policy mention "natural hazards" (Elementarschäden)?
- **Flood plan:** In the family plan, choose a meeting point on higher ground that you can reach without going through an underpass, and a safe place for the car.

UNDERSTANDING

River floods and heavy rain

River floods happen when widespread, long-lasting rain – sometimes together with melting snow – makes rivers burst their banks. According to the German federal flood protection guide (Hochwasserschutzfibel), on larger rivers a forecast one to two days ahead and a reliable prediction several hours ahead are possible. On smaller rivers in hilly regions, the warning time shrinks to a few hours.

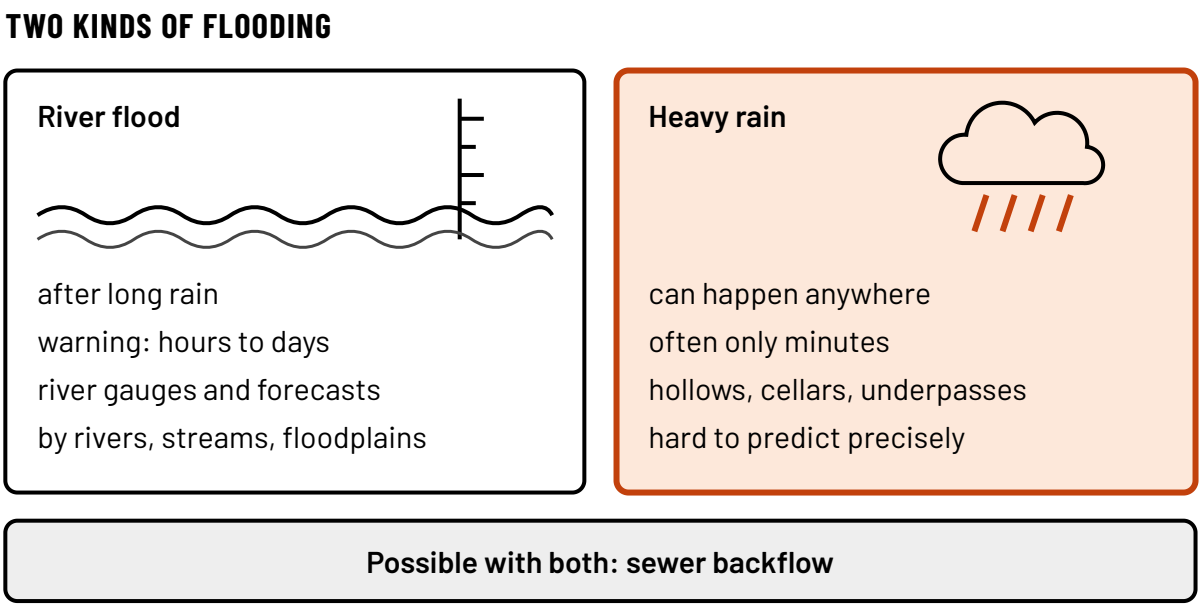
Heavy rain comes mostly in summer, with thunderstorms. It is local and short, but brings the largest amounts of rain. Small streams then rise very quickly, and the sewers are not designed for such volumes. The water runs off over the surface, collects in hollows and low points such as underpasses and gets into cellars and underground car parks – even far away from any river. There is often hardly any time; you can only act sensibly on the basis of the weather warning, ideally before the rain starts (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

Often overlooked:

- **Sewer backflow:** If the sewer is overloaded, water is pushed back into the building through the house connection – through floor drains, showers or toilets in the cellar. This happens with

heavy rain just as with river floods.

- **Rising groundwater:** After long wet periods, the groundwater rises, often with a delay, and seeps through leaky cellar walls.
- **Storm surges** on the coast: they can be forecast well; in Hamburg and Bremen, evacuations are an established part of coastal protection.



Two kinds of flooding compared: a river flood comes after long rain, gives hours to days of warning and is forecast using river gauges. Heavy rain can happen anywhere, often leaves only minutes, floods hollows, cellars and underpasses and is hard to predict precisely. Sewer backflow is possible with both.

How warnings work

Different bodies issue warnings – about different things:

- **The German Weather Service (DWD)** warns about the weather, such as heavy rain and prolonged rain, down to district or municipality level. Its warnings have four levels: weather warning (yellow), warning of significant weather (orange), severe weather warning (red) and extreme weather (violet).
- **The federal states' flood centres** measure river levels, calculate forecasts and issue flood warnings. You can see them all in one place on the **cross-state flood portal** (hochwasserzentralen.de) and in the states' official river-level app. Many states use **alert levels** (Meldestufen) at the gauges. In Bavaria, for example, level 1 means minor flooding of the banks in places, level 3 means individual built-up plots or cellars are flooded, and level 4 means larger built-up areas are flooded. Which water level belongs to which alert level is set for each gauge individually.
- **The NINA warning app** of the Federal Office of Civil Protection (BBK) combines DWD weather warnings, flood information from the cross-state flood portal and civil-protection warnings. Bereitsein shows the same official warnings under Warnings for the districts you choose.

- **Locally,** your town or municipality informs people, often with loudspeaker vans. In particularly dangerous situations, **sirens** are added (a one-minute rising and falling tone means: danger, find out more) as well as **mobile phone alerts** via cell broadcast.

What the DWD levels mean for heavy rain (amount of rain in litres per square metre):

LEVEL	WARNING	IN 1 HOUR	IN 6 HOURS
2	Heavy rain	15 to 25	20 to 35
3	Very heavy rain	25 to 40	35 to 60
4	Extremely heavy rain	over 40	over 60

Important with heavy rain: The warnings usually cover a whole district, but a thunderstorm cell is often only a few kilometres across. Perhaps it stays dry where you are – perhaps it hits your very street. Warning apps add to your own attention; they don't replace it. And every flood is different; experience from earlier floods can be misleading (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

During a power cut many warning channels stop working – but a radio with batteries, a crank or in the car still works (BBK). More in the guide Warnings and communication.

Reading hazard maps

The federal states produce **flood hazard maps** and **flood risk maps** for rivers with significant risk; they are public and free. The details differ from state to state. This is how to read them (example: Bavaria):

- **Three scenarios:** *HQhäufig* is a frequent flood, in Bavaria a 10-year flood (not available for all rivers). *HQ100* occurs on average once in 100 years – but that doesn't mean the next 99 years will be quiet; it can also happen several times in quick succession. *HQextrem* is a very rare event, in Bavaria roughly a 1,000-year flood, in which flood defences usually no longer work.
- **Colours:** Blue areas show where water would stand. The darker the shade, the deeper the water. In Bavaria, yellow to orange areas show land behind dykes that would only flood if the defences failed – dykes don't offer one hundred per cent safety either.
- **Hazard and risk:** Hazard maps show extent and water depth, sometimes also flow speed. Risk maps also show how the land is used – for example how many people would be affected, or where there are facilities that would endanger the environment if flooded.
- **What's missing:** Flood hazard maps only show flooding from rivers and streams. **Heavy rain, sewer backflow and high groundwater are not included.** Missing information on the map expressly does not mean that no flooding can occur there (Bavarian Environment Agency, LfU).

Heavy-rain hazard maps only exist in some places, mostly produced by the municipality, so each one looks different. They show where rainwater can collect or not drain away fast enough, for example in small hollows. The Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy advises: where there are local heavy-

rain maps, use them – and you only get the full picture if you look at the **heavy-rain map and the flood hazard map together**.

Don't wait for an emergency to look up the maps: When river levels rise, the portals are often overloaded. Print them out beforehand (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

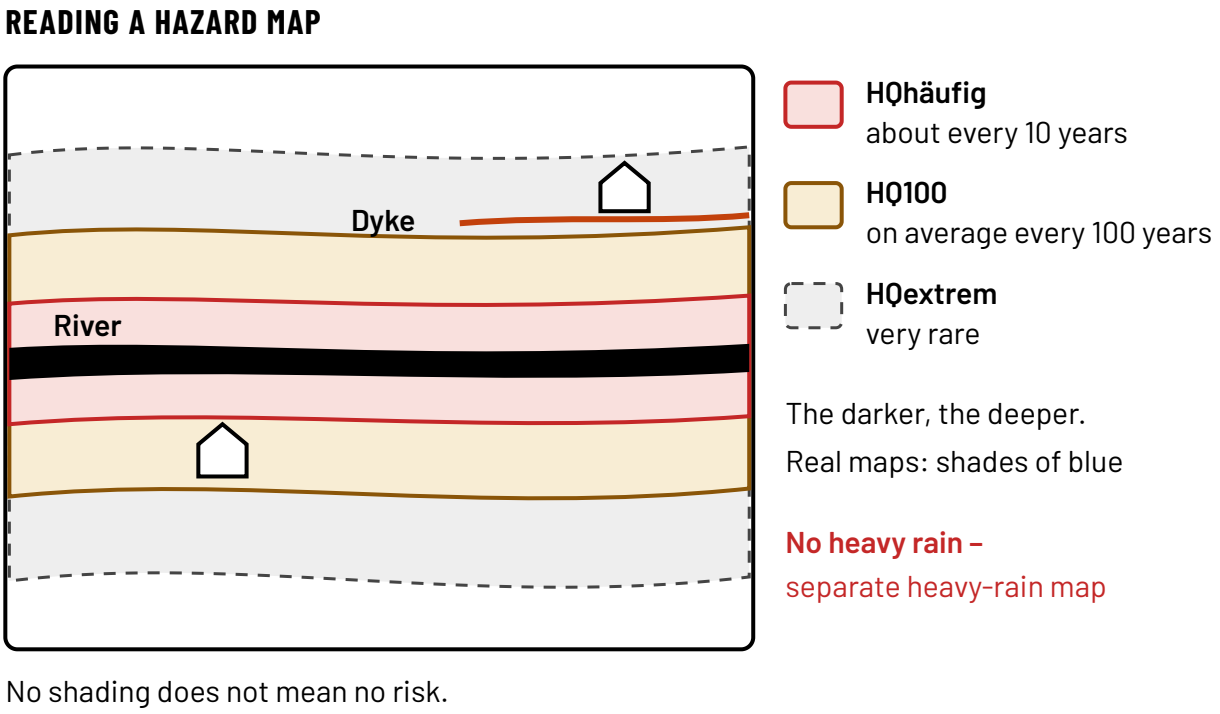
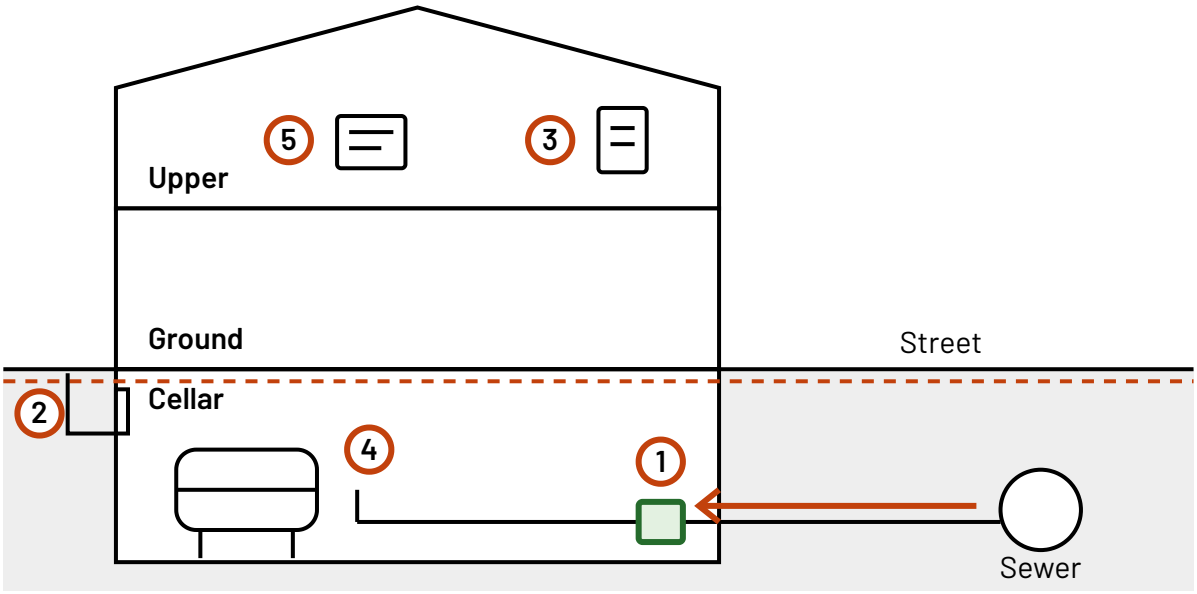


Diagram of a flood hazard map: next to the river there are three bands. The darkest, narrow band is HQhäufig, about every 10 years; the middle band HQ100, on average every 100 years; the light, wide band HQextrem, very rare. A house lies in the HQextrem area, a dyke does not protect for certain. The darker, the deeper. Heavy rain is not shown on this map.

How water gets into the house

Water finds many ways in: through cellar windows and light wells, through doors and garages, through leaky walls and pipe or cable entries – and from below, through the sewer. This is where the **backflow level** (Rückstauebene) comes in: it marks how high water in the sewer can rise. Unless the authority sets a different level, it is the height of the road surface at your connection. Anything in the house below it – a floor drain, shower or toilet in the cellar or in a basement flat – can be flooded by backflow. In flood areas, water in the sewer can even rise to the level of the flood (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

PROTECTING HOUSE AND CELLAR



1. Backflow valve, service regularly
2. Seal cellar window, light well
3. Fuse box upstairs if possible
4. Oil tank secured against floating
5. Documents, valuables upstairs

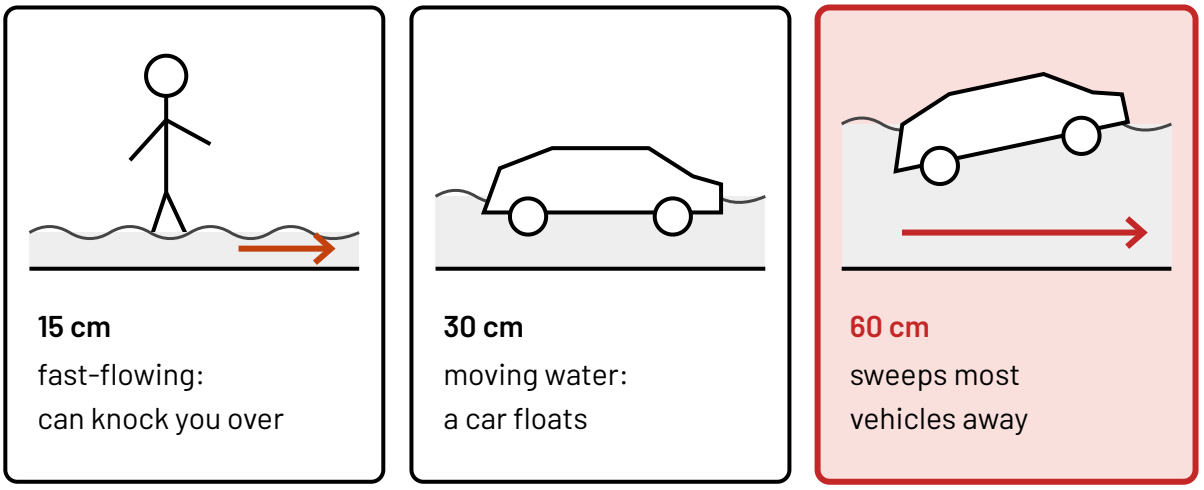
Backflow level, usually street

Cross-section of a house with a cellar: 1. backflow valve on the waste pipe to the sewer, service it regularly. 2. seal cellar windows and light wells. 3. fuse box upstairs if possible, switch off rooms at risk. 4. secure the heating oil tank against floating. 5. documents and valuables upstairs. The backflow level is usually at street height; everything below it is at risk.

Why water is so dangerous

- **Force:** Just **15 cm of fast-flowing water** can knock a person off their feet, **30 cm** of moving water is enough to float an average car, and **60 cm** will sweep most vehicles away (Natural Resources Wales; for the 30 cm, also the Environment Agency).
- **Water pressure:** When a cellar floods, the water pushes the door shut – it can no longer be opened from inside (BBK). Even a few tens of centimetres of water can be life-threatening if doors jam or electricity is involved (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **Electricity:** Flooded electrical installations are a danger to life. Only enter flooded rooms if you are sure the power is off (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **What you can't see and what's in it:** open manholes, undermined roads, debris – and heating oil, sewage, chemicals and germs. Never drink floodwater, not even boiled or filtered (see Drinking water).

HOW MUCH WATER IS DANGEROUS



Never walk or drive through water

Water depth and danger: at 15 centimetres of fast-flowing water a person can fall. At 30 centimetres of moving water a car floats. At 60 centimetres most vehicles are swept away. So never walk or drive through water.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), BBK "Warn-App NINA", Hochwasserschutzfibel (BMWSB, 2/2022), DWD warning criteria, cross-state flood portal, LfU Bavaria (map FAQ, location check, flood warning service), BKG heavy-rain hazard map notes (10/2021), Natural Resources Wales, Environment Agency (12/2019), CDC (8/2026).

PREPARING

Assessing your risk

Under the German Water Resources Act, anyone who may be affected by flooding is expected to take precautions within what is possible and reasonable. It starts with these questions:

1. **Is your home on the flood hazard map?** If so: in which scenario, and how deep would the water be? Is it behind a dyke?
2. **Is there a heavy-rain hazard map?** Ask your town or municipality. When buying or renting a home, it is also worth asking about the local flood risk (BBK).
3. **Where does your home sit in the landscape?** In a hollow, at the foot of a slope, by a small stream, at a low point in the road? Street or field names such as "Im Tal" (in the valley), "Mühlenstraße" (mill street) or "Hohlweg" (sunken lane) can also be a clue (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
4. **What lies below street level?** Cellar, basement flat, underground car park, drains and toilets in the basement – anything below the backflow level is at risk from backflow.
5. **Where can water get in?** Cellar windows, light wells, cellar door, garage door, pipe and cable entries.

6. **What happened in the past?** Ask neighbours who have lived there a long time. The Hochwasserschutzfibel explicitly advises newcomers to seek advice from long-standing residents.

Some states bring this together for an address, for example Bavaria with its "Wassergefahren" location check; nationwide, the DWD's **natural hazards portal** (Naturgefahrenportal) shows warnings and location-based hazards. For a house, independent expert advice can find the ways water gets in and suggest suitable measures (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

Setting up warnings

1. Under Warnings, choose the districts where you live, work and go to school.
2. Install a warning app such as NINA and keep heavy-rain and flood warnings switched on. For river levels there is the states' official, free river-level app (see Recommended apps).
3. Keep a radio with batteries or a crank ready (BBK).
4. Keep your phone reachable, even at night, when a crisis is looming (BBK).
5. If you live by a river: find the nearest gauge. Municipalities set out in their alert plans which measures are needed at which gauge levels (LfU Bavaria) – ask there or ask long-standing neighbours from what level things get critical for you, and note down the number.

Where's what: electricity, water, gas

Everyone in the family should know where the main switches and shut-offs for water, electricity, heating, gas and oil are (Hochwasserschutzfibel). Note them under Where's what, with a photo. Check in the fuse box whether the cellar and ground floor have their own fuses: then you can switch off just these areas – safer for anyone still in the house (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

Protecting the house

The Hochwasserschutzfibel describes three strategies that work in combination: **avoiding** (moving valuable things higher), **resisting** (keeping water out) and **adapting** (fitting things out so water does little damage). Sometimes deliberately letting a building flood does less harm than trying to keep every drop out – if the water outside rises high, it presses on the walls and floor slab. That's why larger alterations should be planned by a professional.

Backflow protection: Backflow valves or lifting units protect all drains below the backflow level (BBK, Hochwasserschutzfibel). Backflow valves must be an approved type, correctly installed and **serviced regularly** – the Fibel mentions a requirement to service them every six months. The consumer advice centre (Verbraucherzentrale) points out that backflow damage may not be insured without a working backflow device.

Openings: Cellar windows, doors and pipe entries can be sealed, and there are flood-resistant windows, doors and light wells. With such systems, check the maximum water height the manufacturer specifies (Hochwasserschutzfibel). The BBK advises keeping waterproof plywood panels, silicone for sealing doors and windows, and sandbags ready; for higher risk there are mobile systems such as stop-log barriers.

Electricity and heating: The fuse box and gas heating should be in flood-safe areas where possible, i.e. upstairs (BBK). In the cellar and on the ground floor, sockets and cables should be above the expected water level (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

Heating oil tank: Unsecured, partly empty tanks can float up, tip over and tear off pipes – heating oil then leaks out and contaminates the house and surroundings. Tanks must be secured against floating (BBK), and in flood and risk areas there are legal retrofitting requirements. Have existing tank installations assessed for flood risk (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

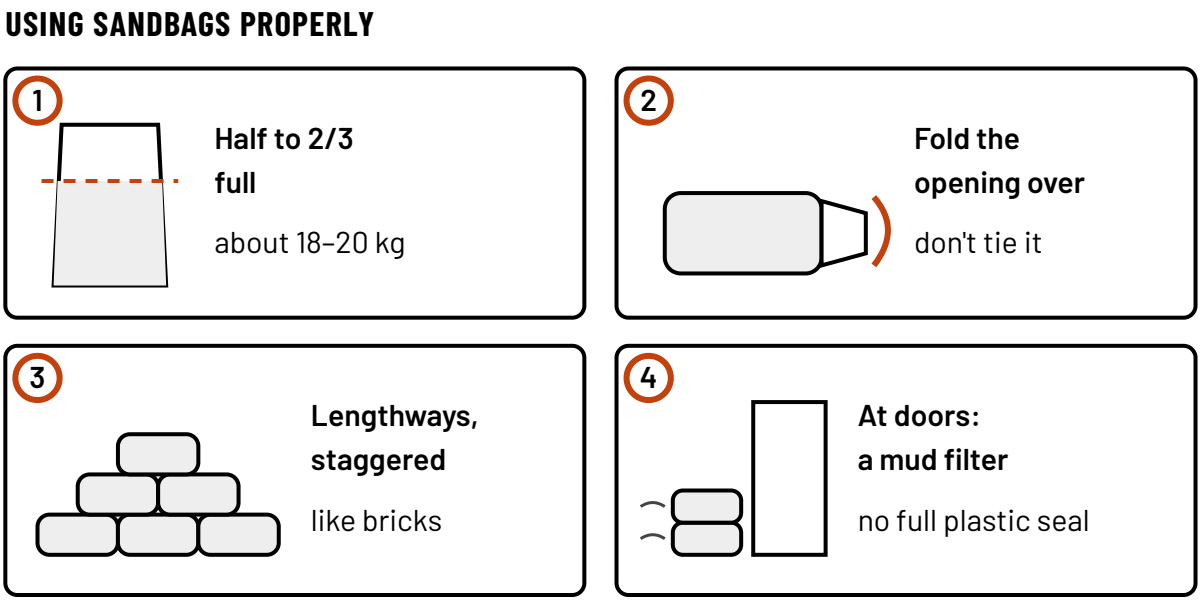
Equipment: The BBK mentions a pump sump in the cellar and a sewage pump; the Fibel lists, among other things, a submersible pump with a residual-current device, waterproof extension leads, rubber boots and sandbags. The fire brigade and THW need their equipment themselves in an emergency – you can make larger purchases together with your neighbours.

Sandbags: what they can and can't do

Sandbags are cheap, flexible and, after a short briefing, can be filled by laypeople. This is how the Baden-Württemberg State Fire Service College describes it:

1. **Fill them half to at most two-thirds full.** Fuller bags don't mould to the ground and neighbouring bags and become too heavy. A bag filled two-thirds weighs about 18 to 20 kg.
2. **Fold the opening over** instead of tying it – that's quicker and is enough once the bag is in place. Bags are only tied if they are thrown or transported loose.
3. **Lay them lengthways** and **staggered** like a brick wall, tightly packed, so they form a solid bond. With bags laid crossways, the folded side faces the water.
4. **Don't throw them** – pass them from hand to hand in a chain.

And this is the honest limit: doors and windows often **can't be made watertight** with sandbags. In front of doors and windows, however, they act as a **filter** – much less mud gets into the house, and cleaning up is easier. The fire service experts advise against sealing completely with plastic sheeting, because in many cases water must be able to get into the building for it to remain stable. If water flows over a sandbag barrier, it can give way suddenly (Hochwasserschutzfibel). And after use, sand and bags are almost always contaminated and must be disposed of.



Overtopped barriers can fail suddenly.

Using sandbags properly in four steps: 1. fill half to two-thirds, about 18 to 20 kilograms. 2. fold the opening over, don't tie it. 3. lay lengthways and staggered like a brick wall. 4. in front of doors as a mud filter, don't seal completely with sheeting.

Cellar and ground floor: what goes where

- **Documents and irreplaceable things upstairs:** Important documents belong outside the danger area (BBK), ideally packed waterproof. What matters first are papers and keepsakes that are hard to replace – not the sofa (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **Hazardous substances upstairs:** Anything harmful to health or the environment, such as solvents or pesticides, also belongs out of the danger area (BBK).
- **Make a clearing plan:** The Fibel advises deciding in advance – as a list and as a sketch – what goes upstairs in which order in an emergency. Heavy items like the washing machine and dryer can stand permanently on a platform.
- **No supplies in the flood zone:** Keep water and food supplies in a cellar that doesn't flood – otherwise one floor up (see Drinking water and Building up food supplies).

Insurance: natural hazards cover

In Germany, flooding from rivers or heavy rain and sewer backflow are not included as standard in either buildings or contents insurance. There is an add-on for **natural hazards** (Elementarschäden) for this, which can usually only be taken out together with the main policy (Verbraucherzentrale, Hochwasserschutzfibel). There is currently no obligation to have it.

- **The building** is insured by the owner. **Contents** are insured by whoever lives there. If you rent, ask your landlord whether the building has natural hazards cover (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **What is usually not covered:** groundwater pushing through the walls from below (Verbraucherzentrale).

- **Obligations:** Working backflow valves are required in rooms at risk of flooding, and drainage pipes on the property must be kept clear. If you neglect this, the insurer may pay nothing or only part (Verbraucherzentrale).
- **Car:** Flood damage is usually covered by at least partial comprehensive cover (Teilkasko) (Verbraucherzentrale).

Emergency bag and plan

Keep your **emergency bag** ready for an evacuation: important medicines, documents, a change of clothes, a torch and enough water (BBK). Tick off what goes in which bag under Grab bag. In the family plan you set meeting points, destinations and routes – for floods on **higher ground**, avoiding underpasses and riverbanks. Municipalities set out flood-free routes, assembly points and emergency shelters in their emergency plans (Hochwasserschutzfibel); ask about them and mark them as important places on the Map. With relief shading and contour lines you can see there where the ground rises. More in the guide Evacuation.

Agree in the family who does what, and remember that not everyone is always at home (Hochwasserschutzfibel). Organise **help among neighbours** – who helps whom? – because floods can cut off landlines and mobile networks. See the guide Helping your neighbours.

Variations for your household

Ground-floor or basement flat, or a cellar storage room

- Only keep things in the cellar storage room that can get wet.
- Drains, showers and toilets below street level are at risk from backflow – ask about backflow protection and servicing.
- Talk to neighbours on upper floors about whether you could go up to them in an emergency.
- You take out natural hazards cover for your own contents yourself, not your landlord.

House

- Insure the building and contents, as damage can occur despite all precautions (BBK).
- Clean drains and gullies regularly, have backflow valves serviced (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

Underground car park and car

- If there is a risk of flooding, move the car out of the garage or underground car park to a safe, higher place in good time (Hochwasserschutzfibel) – as long as this can be done safely. If there is already water in the underground car park, stay out (BBK).

With children

- Make children aware of the particular dangers and agree where they go if they are out – perhaps the way to relatives or friends is shorter and safer (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

- Don't let children play in floodwater or on flooded areas, nor with toys that were in the water and haven't been disinfected. Even shallow standing water can be dangerous for small children (CDC).
- Take their worries seriously and explain honestly what is happening (BBK). More in the guide Children in a crisis.

With care needs or a disability

- Think about what you need if you have to leave the house quickly: mobility aids, glasses or hearing aid, spare batteries, medication plan and supply, emergency contacts, emergency ID card (BBK).
- If you can't use escape routes on your own: who will support you, and how? Talk about it with your neighbours, family and friends (BBK).
- Floods can also cause power cuts. More in the guides Getting through a power cut and People who need care, and pets.

With pets

- If there is danger, pets come upstairs with you or out of the danger zone (Hochwasserschutzfibel, GOV.UK).
- Find out in advance where animals can stay, and store food safely (Hochwasserschutzfibel). Keep a carrier, lead, food and water to hand.

Without a car

- Arrange a lift with friends, family or neighbours in advance (CDC).
- During ordered evacuations, municipalities take people from flood-safe assembly points to emergency shelters (Hochwasserschutzfibel). Ask where your assembly point is, and plan a walking route there – without an underpass.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), Hochwasserschutzfibel (BMWSB, 2/2022), LfU Bavaria (location check), Naturgefahrenportal (DWD), Baden-Württemberg State Fire Service College (7/2014), City of Stuttgart (6/2024), Verbraucherzentrale (7/2026, 8/2026), CDC (8/2026), GOV.UK.

IN AN EMERGENCY

Emergency mode has the short version: Emergency – flood. Instructions from the authorities and emergency services always come first.

When there is a heavy-rain or flood warning

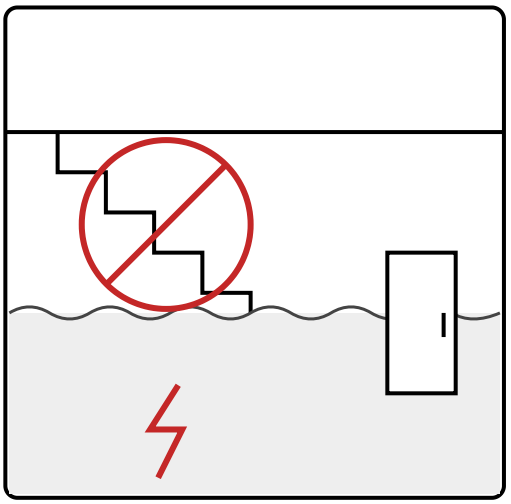
1. **Stay informed:** warning app, radio, loudspeaker announcements. By rivers, follow the flood centres' reports and the gauges. Charge your phone (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

2. **Move the car to safety:** out of the underground car park and garage to higher ground – only as long as there is no water yet.
3. **Clear the cellar while it is dry:** take upstairs what must not get wet. If there is already water in the cellar: don't go in – danger to life (Hochwasserschutzfibel, City of Stuttgart).
4. **Switch off the power to rooms at risk early,** at the fuses for the cellar and ground floor (BBK). Switch off electrical appliances in the danger area or put them up high. If danger is acute – or if the authorities tell you to – turn off the main gas, water and electricity supplies if it is safe to do so; remember the fridge and freezer (Hochwasserschutzfibel, GOV.UK).
5. **Put protection in place:** seal cellar windows and doors, lay sandbags, secure the heating oil tank and equipment – but only as long as you are not standing in water.
6. **Warn and help others:** tell your neighbours, bring children and older people to safety (BBK).
7. **Get your emergency bag ready** and prepare for an evacuation (BBK).

When the water comes

1. **Never go into the cellar, the underground car park or an underpass.** If the cellar floods, the door can no longer be opened from inside, and there is a risk of a fatal electric shock (BBK).
2. **No light switches, no appliances while you are standing in water** (GOV.UK, CDC). If you can only reach the fuse box through water, leave it alone – call 112 if there is danger, otherwise an electrician later.
3. **Go upstairs:** to higher floors, with family, pets, emergency bag and documents (BBK, GOV.UK).
4. **If lives are in danger, call 112.** If 110 and 112 don't work, go to the nearest police station or hospital if possible (BBK). If you are trapped, make yourself noticed at the window – Signal helps with a light and a whistle tone, even without a network.
5. **If heating oil or another hazardous substance leaks, call the fire brigade immediately** (BBK).

WATER IN THE CELLAR: STAY OUT



1. Water pressure holds door shut
2. Electricity in water can kill
3. The water rises fast

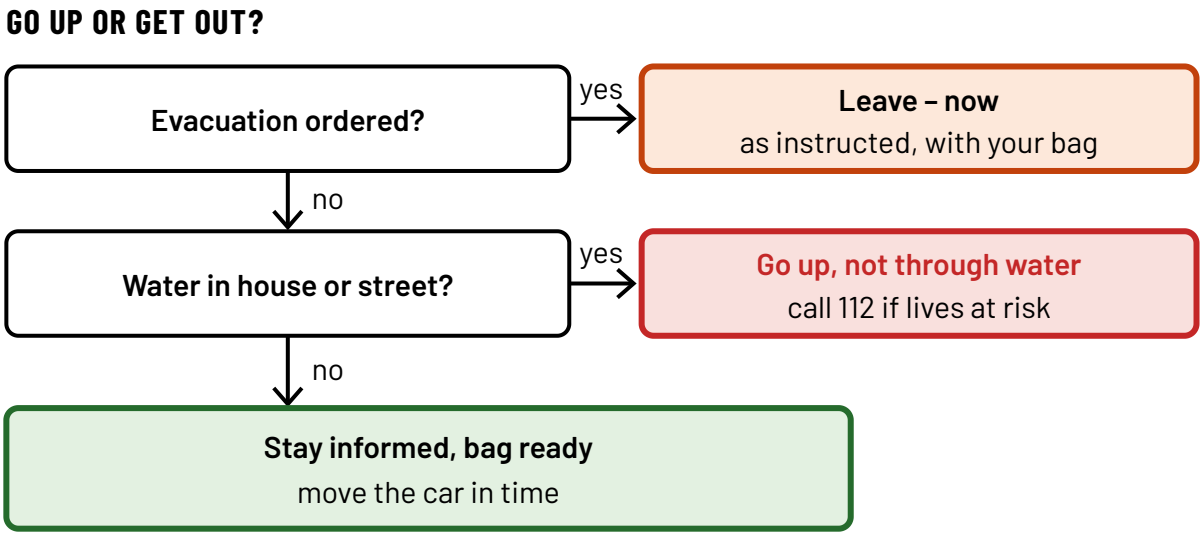
Instead:
go upstairs
switch off power only when dry

Cellar stairs with a no-entry sign: never go down if there is water in the cellar. 1. water pressure holds the door shut. 2. electricity in the water can kill. 3. the water rises fast. Instead go upstairs and only switch off the power from a dry spot.

Go up or get out?

In floods, heavy rain and flash floods, higher ground or higher floors give the best protection (BBK). Whether you go upstairs or leave the house depends on the situation:

- **Evacuation ordered?** Then you go – quickly and as the authorities say. An evacuation is only ordered when there is serious danger to life and limb, and there is usually little time (Hochwasserschutzfibel). The steps are in the guide Evacuation.
- **Water already rising in the house or in the street?** Don't go out through the water. Go upstairs and stay there until help comes or the water goes down. If lives are in danger, call 112.
- **Still dry, but a warning is active?** Stay informed, keep your emergency bag ready, move the car in time, clear the cellar – and leave at once if told to.



Decision path in a flood: if an evacuation has been ordered, leave at once, as instructed and with your emergency bag. If not: if there is already water in the house or the street, go upstairs, not through the water, call 112 if lives are in danger. If not: stay informed, keep your emergency bag ready, move the car in time.

Out and about, and in the car

- **Never drive or walk through flooded roads.** Turn around and find another route (Environment Agency). The road surface may be undermined, manhole covers washed away can leave open shafts, and the water depth is often underestimated (Baden-Württemberg State Fire Service College).
- **Avoid underpasses, underground car parks, underground stations and riverbanks,** and respect barriers (BBK).
- **Keep away from electricity:** Don't drive through water with power lines in it, and never touch fallen lines (CDC).
- **Swimming doesn't help:** Floodwater is a drowning risk for everyone, even strong swimmers – and even shallow, fast-moving water can be deadly (CDC).
- For thunderstorms, storms and hail when you're out, see the guide Severe weather.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), Hochwasserschutzfibel (BMWSB, 2/2022), Baden-Württemberg State Fire Service College (7/2014), City of Stuttgart (6/2024), Environment Agency (12/2019), GOV.UK "What to do during a flood", CDC (8/2026).

AFTERWARDS

Going back into the house

- **Only when it is safe:** After an evacuation, only once it has been given the all-clear. With badly affected buildings, check whether there is a risk of collapse – if in doubt, don't go in and call in

an expert (Hochwasserschutzfibel, CDC).

- **Return in daylight,** with a torch rather than a candle (CDC). Only enter flooded areas if you have a secure footing, stairs and floors will hold and the power is off (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **Electricity:** If you can reach the main switch from a dry spot, switch it off. If you'd have to step into water, call an electrician. Before the power is switched back on, a qualified electrician must check the system (CDC, GOV.UK); have electrical appliances checked (BBK).
- **Smell of gas:** get out immediately, don't switch anything that could make a spark. If it is safe, turn off the main valve and open the windows, then call the gas emergency service or the fire brigade (CDC).
- **Heating:** Never restart a flooded heating system yourself – safety devices may fail and there is a risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. Leave it to a specialist firm (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **Protection:** rubber boots or waterproof shoes, gloves and safety glasses, a respirator mask if there is mould. Avoid skin contact with floodwater, cover wounds with waterproof dressings, wash your hands – always before eating (Hochwasserschutzfibel, CDC).

Documenting and insurance

The Verbraucherzentrale sums it up in three words: **secure, document, inform.**

1. **Photos or videos before you clean up** – of all damage and of the **water line** on walls and furniture (Hochwasserschutzfibel, GOV.UK).
2. **Make a list** of all damaged items before you throw anything away (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
3. **Inform your insurer promptly** and agree the clean-up with them (Verbraucherzentrale, Hochwasserschutzfibel). Many insurers have claims hotlines.
4. **Limit the damage:** You are obliged not to let the damage get worse – if there is a little water in the cellar, start scooping it out and drying once you've documented it (Verbraucherzentrale).
5. **Beware of scams:** The Verbraucherzentrale warns of fake online shops offering pumps or dryers for payment in advance, and of dubious charity collectors.

Pumping out, mud and oil

- **Only pump out once the water outside is falling too** and no more is flowing in – otherwise water presses on the walls and floor slab from outside, and there is a risk of uplift damage and undermining (Hochwasserschutzfibel, Baden-Württemberg State Fire Service College).
- **Mud** is best shovelled out while the water is still draining – once dry it sets hard (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **Oil on the water:** The oil must be bound and removed first, then you pump – otherwise the oil film coats the walls permanently. Call the fire brigade (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **Petrol engines** such as generators or pumps must never run inside the house, cellar or garage – carbon monoxide. Outside, keep them at least 6 metres from doors, windows and vents (CDC).

Drying and mould

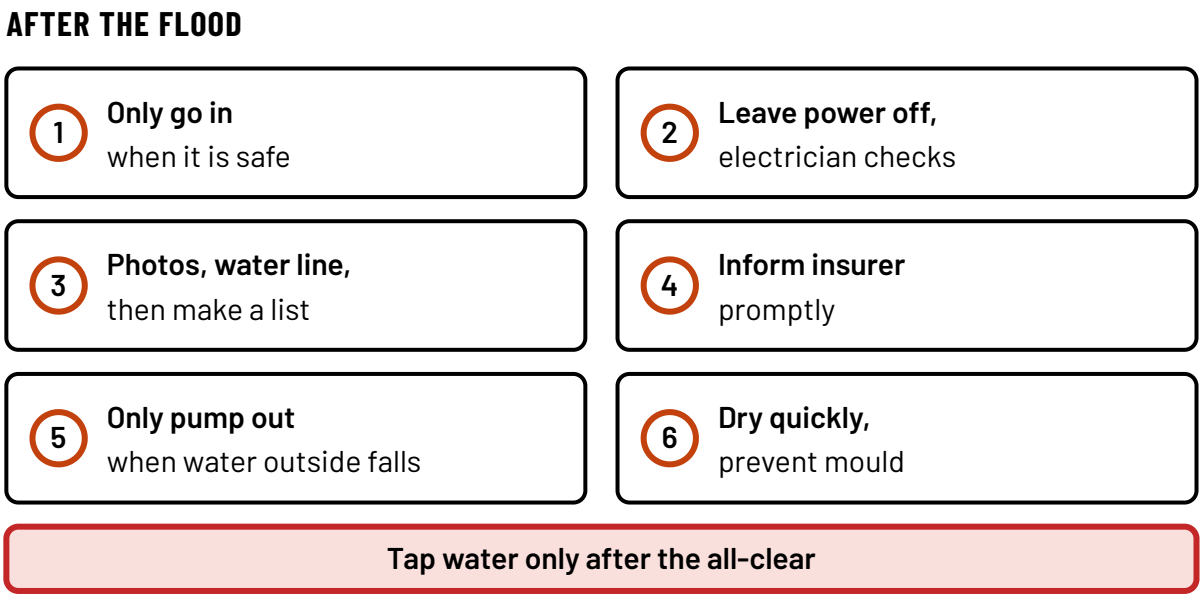
- **Dry everything as quickly as possible** to avoid structural damage, mould and pests (BBK). Ventilate well; drying equipment is often needed, and drying can take several weeks (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- **Place fans** at a window or door so they blow air outwards – not inwards, so mould isn't spread around (CDC).
- **Anything that can't be dried within 24 to 48 hours** should be thrown away (German Environment Agency, UBA).
- If the house was flooded and closed up for several days, assume there is mould (CDC). In warm weather it can form within a few days (Hochwasserschutzfibel).
- In walls and floors with several layers, every layer has to dry; sometimes outer layers have to come off. There are firms that specialise in drying buildings, and if oil has soaked into the masonry, an expert is needed (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

Water and food

- **Throw away food that has touched floodwater** (CDC, GOV.UK). If the power was off for a long time, check the fridge and freezer – see the guide Getting through a power cut.
- **Only drink tap water again** once the authorities or the water supplier say it is safe; until then use your supply or bottled water. Watch out for **boil-water notices** (radio, local council). Never drink floodwater itself. Everything on this in the guide Drinking water.
- **Private wells** should be disinfected after flooding and the water quality tested (Hochwasserschutzfibel).

Car

If a vehicle stood in water up to the oil sump or above the wheels, **don't start the engine again** – have it towed to a garage (Hochwasserschutzfibel).



After the flood in six steps: 1. only go in when it is safe. 2. leave the power off, an electrician checks. 3. photos and water line, then a list. 4. inform your insurer. 5. only pump out when the water outside is falling. 6. dry quickly, prevent mould. Only drink tap water after the all-clear.

Learning from it

Once the worst is over, ask yourselves what the Hochwasserschutzfibel recommends asking before rebuilding: Where did the water come from? How much time did we have? Did our measures make sense – and did anyone put themselves in danger? Then restock your emergency bag, update the family plan and improve one thing. Fear and uncertainty afterwards are normal; help in the guide Stress and anxiety in a crisis.

Sources for this section: BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), Hochwasserschutzfibel (BMWSB, 2/2022), Baden-Württemberg State Fire Service College (7/2014), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026), German Environment Agency (6/2013), CDC (8/2026), GOV.UK "What to do after a flood".

COMMON MISTAKES

- **"There's no river here":** Heavy rain can flood cellars and streets anywhere.
- **Relying on the map:** Flood hazard maps don't show heavy rain or sewer backflow.
- **Popping down to the cellar** to save something when water is already coming in.
- **Driving through water** – "it's only ankle-deep". 30 cm of moving water can float a car.
- **Fetching the car from the underground car park** when there's already water in it.
- **Using switches while standing in water.**
- **Never having the backflow valve serviced** – or not having one at all.
- **Pumping out the cellar while the water outside is still rising.**
- **Not taking photos before cleaning up.**

- **Switching the heating or electricity back on yourself after the flood.**
- **Forgetting neighbours** who can't get upstairs or out on their own.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Looked at the flood hazard map for your address and printed it
- [ ] Asked the town about a heavy-rain hazard map
- [ ] Assessed where the house sits: hollow, stream, slope, cellar below street level
- [ ] Warnings set up for the districts where you live and work, warning app installed
- [ ] Radio with batteries or a crank
- [ ] Nearest gauge and critical water level noted (by rivers)
- [ ] Fuse box (fuses for cellar and ground floor), main water tap, gas and oil shut-offs under "Where's what"
- [ ] Backflow protection in place and serviced regularly (or asked the landlord)
- [ ] Heating oil tank secured against floating and assessed
- [ ] Documents, keepsakes and chemicals moved up from the cellar
- [ ] Clearing plan for the cellar: what goes upstairs first
- [ ] If needed: sandbags, plywood panels, silicone, submersible pump with residual-current device, rubber boots
- [ ] Insurance checked: natural hazards cover for contents and building
- [ ] Emergency bag with medicines, documents, change of clothes, torch and water
- [ ] Meeting point on higher ground and a route without underpasses in the family plan
- [ ] Safe parking place for the car away from underground car parks and hollows
- [ ] Municipal assembly point and emergency shelter known
- [ ] Help among neighbours agreed: who helps whom?
- [ ] Children know the rules: not into the water, not into the cellar

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All links checked on 5 November 2026.

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CHAPTER 8

WARNINGS AND COMMUNICATION

How warnings work in Germany, what the sirens mean, how to set up phone alerts properly – and how to reach each other when the network is overloaded or down.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

A warning only helps if it reaches you – and if you know what it means. Both can be prepared calmly, on an ordinary day, in a few minutes. Then there is the second half of this guide: how do you reach each other as a family when everyone is trying to call at once, or when the phone doesn't work at all? A few agreements and a sheet of paper go a long way there too.

This guide describes the system in Germany. Warning systems differ from country to country – if you live elsewhere, see "If you don't live in Germany" further down.

AT A GLANCE

- **Warnings go out on many channels at once:** phone alerts (Cell Broadcast), warning apps such as NINA, radio and TV, the internet, digital display boards, loudspeaker vans and sirens. If one channel fails, the others remain.
- **Siren:** one minute of rising and falling tone means "danger – find out more". One minute of steady tone means "all clear".
- **When you are warned:** stay calm, switch on the radio or a warning app, follow the instructions, tell others. Only call the emergency number in a real emergency.
- **A radio that runs without a socket** is your most important link to the outside world when power, mobile network or internet fail.
- **Text, don't talk:** short text messages often still get through when calls fail. Everyone in the household checks in with **one contact person outside the region** – and if nobody can be reached, the paper plan applies.

START SMALL

One small task a day, each one ten minutes at most, almost all of them free:

- **Check phone alerts:** look in your settings to see whether emergency alerts are on – including the lowest level, "hazard information". How to do this is explained under "Preparing".
- **Set up a warning app:** install NINA and add places – where you live, where you work, where your parents or children are. Also choose up to six districts in Bereitsein under Warnings.
- **Find your radio station:** switch on a battery or wind-up radio, find the local station and stick a note with the frequency on the radio. No radio? Put one on your shopping list – until then, the

car radio is your backup.

- **Ask a contact person:** call someone who lives further away and ask whether they would be your family's "control centre" in an emergency. Add them to your family plan.
- **Numbers on paper:** write the most important phone numbers on a sheet – one for your wallet, one for the grab bag, one for each child.
- **Find your local help point:** check your municipality's website for emergency meeting points or "disaster lighthouses" (Katastrophenschutz-Leuchttürme) and where the nearest one is.
- **Do the warning check:** the Drill section has a "Radio and warning check" – ideally on the nationwide warning day in September, but the radio and app steps work any time.

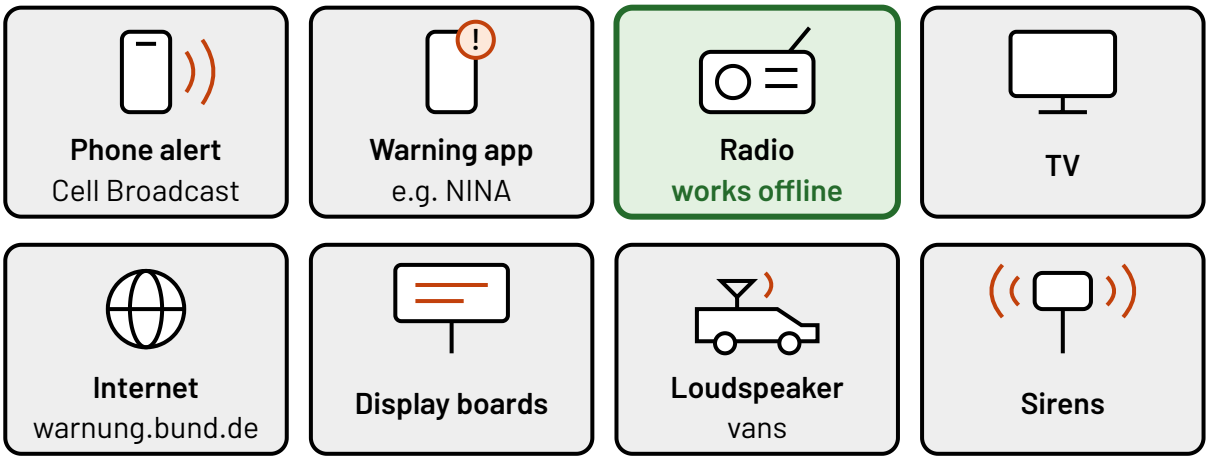
UNDERSTANDING

Why there are so many warning channels

No single channel reaches everyone. There are not sirens everywhere (BBK), older phones may not receive phone alerts (BBK), and during a power cut or a mobile network failure many warning channels stop working (BBK guide).

That is why the authorities in Germany rely on a **mix of warning channels**: several channels complement each other, so the warning bodies reach more people (BBK). Sirens are loud but can only give a few signals. Apps and radio carry much more information – what is happening and what you should do. You get most information through warning apps and radio; in special danger situations, sirens and phones are used as well (BBK guide).

THE WARNING MIX



If one channel fails, the others remain.

✓ Radio: on batteries, crank or in the car

The warning mix: phone alerts via Cell Broadcast, warning apps, radio, TV, internet, digital display boards, loudspeaker vans and sirens. Radio still works when the mobile network and internet fail; on batteries, a crank or in the car it also works without mains power.

The channels one by one

Phone alerts (Cell Broadcast). Since 23 February 2023, the authorities in Germany have been able to send warnings straight to mobile phones (BBK). The message goes to every device connected to a radio cell at that moment – nobody needs your number, and no personal data is collected. You don't need an app, but you do need an up-to-date system: **Android 11 or later** or **iOS 16.1 or later**, with updates installed. The phone has to be switched on and not in flight mode, and the mobile network has to be working. The alert arrives as text of at most 500 characters, with sound, a visual signal and vibration, and links to the federal warning portal (warnung.bund.de) for the full text. Older devices that no longer get updates may not receive it (BBK). Alerts are sent in German and English (BBK, international visitors).

Warning apps. The federal warning app **NINA** delivers civil-protection warnings, police warnings since July 2025, plus weather warnings from the German Weather Service (DWD) and flood information from the federal states (BBK). You subscribe to places – districts, municipalities or an area around a place – and can also be warned for your current location. You won't get warnings for places you haven't subscribed to; the BBK advises adding at least home and work. There are also **KATWARN**, BIWAPP and regional apps (BBK). For weather and floods there are the free apps **WarnWetter** from the German Weather Service and **Meine Pegel**. An overview is under Apps.

Radio and TV. National, state-wide and many local radio stations pass on warnings, on analogue and digital radio (DAB+), as do the main TV channels (BBK). Radio has one special advantage: when the mobile network and internet fail, the stations usually keep working – and a battery, wind-up or car radio doesn't need power from the socket (BBK guide).

Internet. Many news websites are connected to the federal Modular Warning System (MoWaS) and show official warnings as breaking news. All current warnings are on warnung.bund.de (BBK).

Digital display boards. City information boards connected to MoWaS, and some passenger information displays on buses and trains, show warnings (BBK).

Loudspeaker vans. For local incidents, the fire service or police drive through the streets and announce what to do (City of Münster).

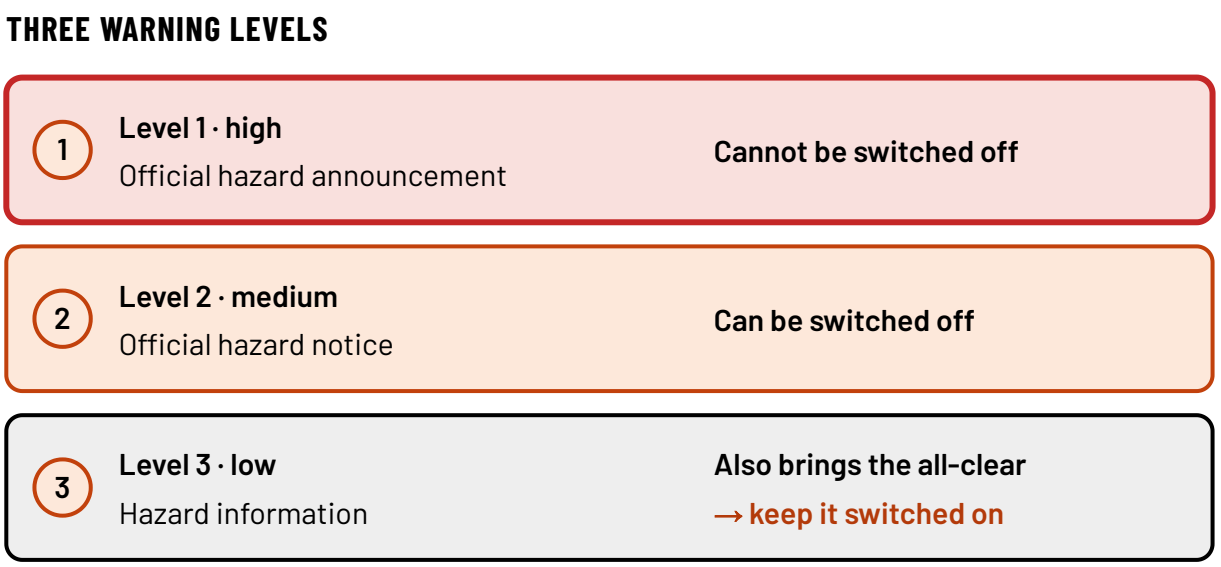
Sirens. They get your attention but don't tell you what is going on. Municipalities buy and run them, and they **do not cover all of Germany** (BBK). Your municipality knows whether there are sirens where you live.

How serious is it? Warning levels

Official civil-protection warnings in Germany have three levels (BBK):

LEVEL	NAME	MEANING
high	Official hazard announcement (Amtliche Gefahrendurchsage)	Danger to life, property or infrastructure is imminent or present. Normal daily life is no longer possible.
medium	Official hazard notice (Amtliche Gefahrenmitteilung)	Danger to public safety or significant damage. Daily life is seriously affected.
low	Hazard information (Gefahreninformation)	There is or will be some disruption, but no specific danger beyond that is likely.

For phone alerts these correspond to warning levels 1 to 3. **Level 1 cannot be switched off**; levels 2 and 3 can, depending on the device (BBK). Don't switch off the lowest level anyway: since November 2025 it also brings the **all-clear** (more under "Afterwards").



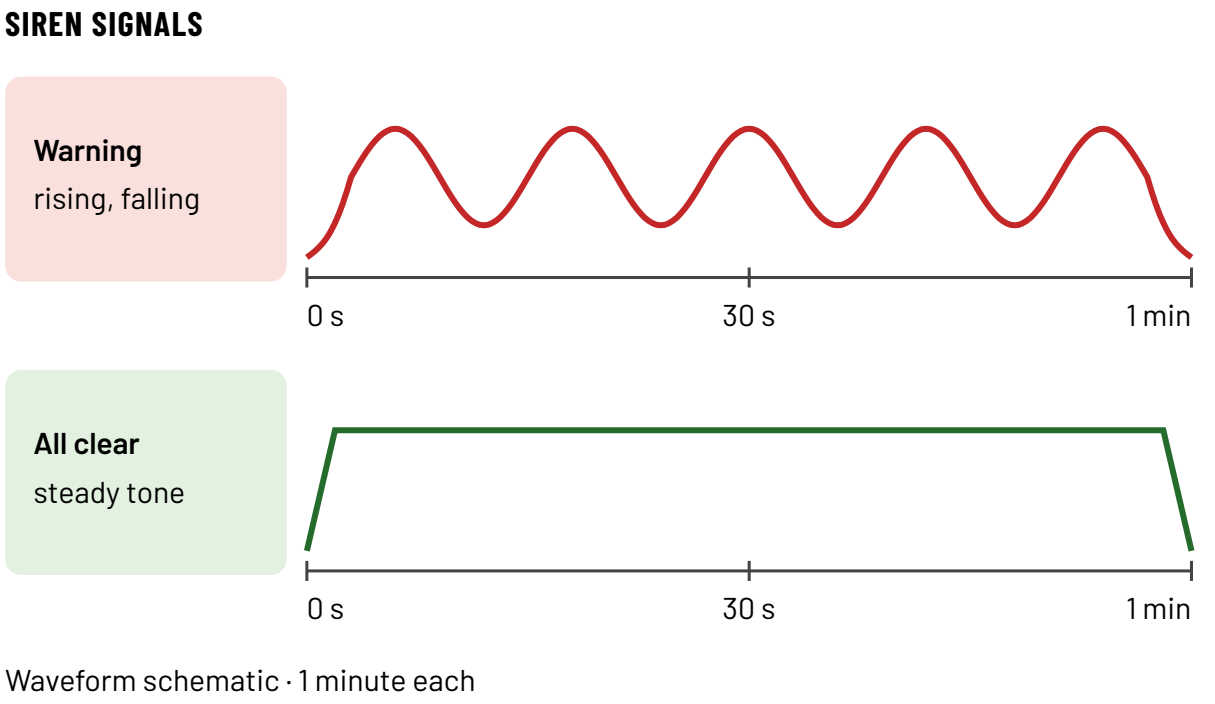
Three warning levels: level 1, high, official hazard announcement, cannot be switched off. Level 2, medium, official hazard notice. Level 3, low, hazard information – it also brings the all-clear, so keep it on.

Weather warnings from the German Weather Service have their own levels and colours: level 1 yellow (weather warning), level 2 orange (significant weather), level 3 red (severe weather warning) and level 4 violet (extreme severe weather). From red upwards the DWD advises avoiding being outdoors; with violet, life-threatening situations can arise, and the instructions of the authorities apply. A hatched "advance information on severe weather" means it could become very dangerous, but place and timing are still uncertain – a good moment to prepare calmly (DWD). More in the guide Severe weather.

Siren signals

Since 2019, two signals have applied uniformly across Germany (BBK):

SIGNAL	MEANING	WHAT TO DO
1 minute of **rising and falling** tone	**Warning** – there is a danger	Find out more: radio, warning app or the authorities' website
1 minute of **steady tone**	**All clear** – the danger is over	Keep paying attention to announcements



Waveform schematic · 1 minute each

Siren signals as a timeline over one minute: the warning is a tone that rises and falls. The all-clear is a steady, continuous tone. The waveform is schematic.

Municipalities can use **their own additional signals** for other events, and sirens are also used to alert the fire brigade. Your town or municipal council can tell you what a local signal means (BBK). What to do step by step when the siren sounds is under "In an emergency".

The nationwide warning day

Once a year, **on the second Thursday in September**, the federal government, the states and the municipalities test their warning systems together (Federal Government, BBK). In 2026 that was on 10 September: at about 11 am the BBK sent out a test warning via radio, TV, display boards, warning apps and Cell Broadcast; many municipalities also ran sirens and loudspeaker vans. The all-clear followed at about 11:45 am. The next warning day is on **9 September 2027 at 11 am** (Federal Government). Municipalities take part voluntarily – ask yours what it tests (BBK). In North Rhine-Westphalia, sirens are also tested on the second Thursday in March (City of Münster).

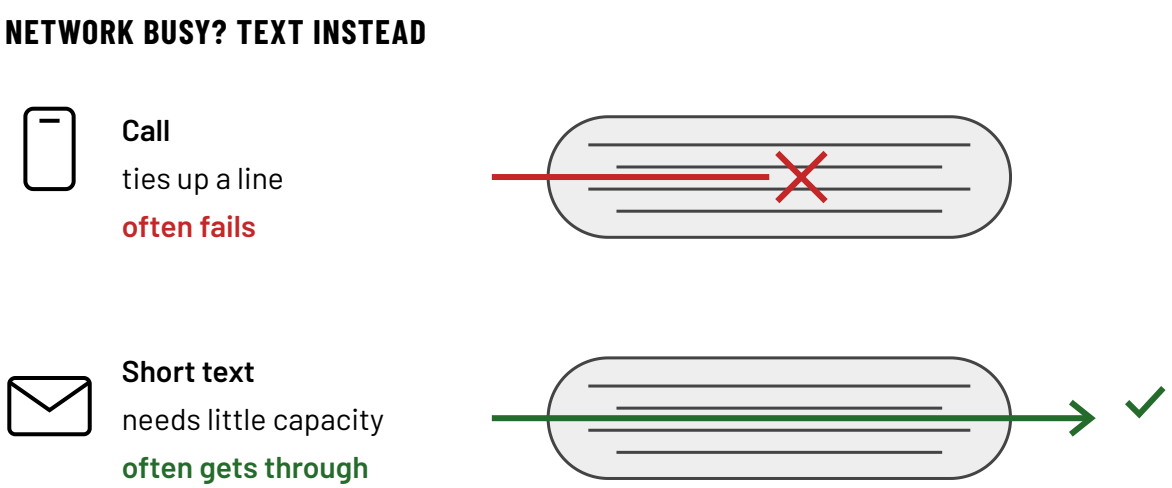
The warning day is your test: did the phone alert arrive? Did you hear the siren? Did the app work? That is exactly what the "Radio and warning check" in the Drill section asks. And if your phone stayed silent:

older devices may not support Cell Broadcast – then the app, the radio and the siren matter all the more (Federal Government).

Why the network gets tight in a crisis

During exceptional events, mobile networks are quickly **overloaded** (BBK power cut). If the power fails as well, it gets even tighter: mobile masts have backup power only in part and only for a short time, and the landline now runs over the internet – router, fibre connection and phone all need power. After a short while, neither landline nor mobile network is available (BBK power cut).

So: **text, don't talk.** A text message needs less network capacity than a call, often still gets through when calls fail, and doesn't tie up lines the emergency services need (Government of Canada, FEMA). Keeping calls to the essentials helps make sure the police and fire service can still be reached in an emergency (BBK power cut).



Overloaded network: a call ties up a line and often doesn't get through. A short text needs little capacity and often still arrives. This keeps lines free for emergency calls.

That is also why a **contact person outside the region** is so valuable: someone who lives further away is often easier to reach in an emergency (FEMA).

If you don't live in Germany

Warning systems differ from country to country, but many work in a similar way:

- **In the EU,** member states have had to ensure since 21 June 2022 that public warnings about major emergencies reach mobile phone users in the affected area – including people who are only there temporarily. Countries can use mobile networks for this, or an equivalent alternative such as an app (EU Directive 2018/1972, Article 110). Ask your national civil-protection authority which channels it uses.

- **In the UK,** the government sends **Emergency Alerts** to phones in an area at risk to life – for example severe flooding, fires or extreme storms. They work on 4G and 5G networks, on iPhones with iOS 14.5 or later and on Android 11 or later. Your phone may make a loud siren-like sound for about ten seconds, even on silent. When you get one, stop what you are doing and follow the instructions – but if you are driving, don't read it until you can stop somewhere safe (GOV.UK). Alerts are sent in English, in Wales also in Welsh (GOV.UK).

The principles in this guide – several channels, a radio, short texts, a contact person, a paper plan – apply everywhere.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "So werden Sie gewarnt", "Sirenen", "Cell Broadcast", "Cell Broadcast: Technische Informationen", "Wann und wovor warnen deutsche Behörden?", "Warn-App NINA", "Bundesweiter Warntag", "Emergency information sources for international visitors", BBK "Stromausfall – Vorsorge und Selbsthilfe", Federal Government "Bundesweiter Warntag" (9/2026), DWD "Warnstufen und Farbskala", City of Münster, Government of Canada (9/2025), FEMA Family Communication Plan, Directive (EU) 2018/1972, GOV.UK "Emergency Alerts".

PREPARING

Setting up phone alerts

On current devices Cell Broadcast is usually switched on already. It's still worth checking, because the menus have different names depending on manufacturer, version and language. A leaflet from the district of Gütersloh describes the paths on German-language phones like this:

iPhone

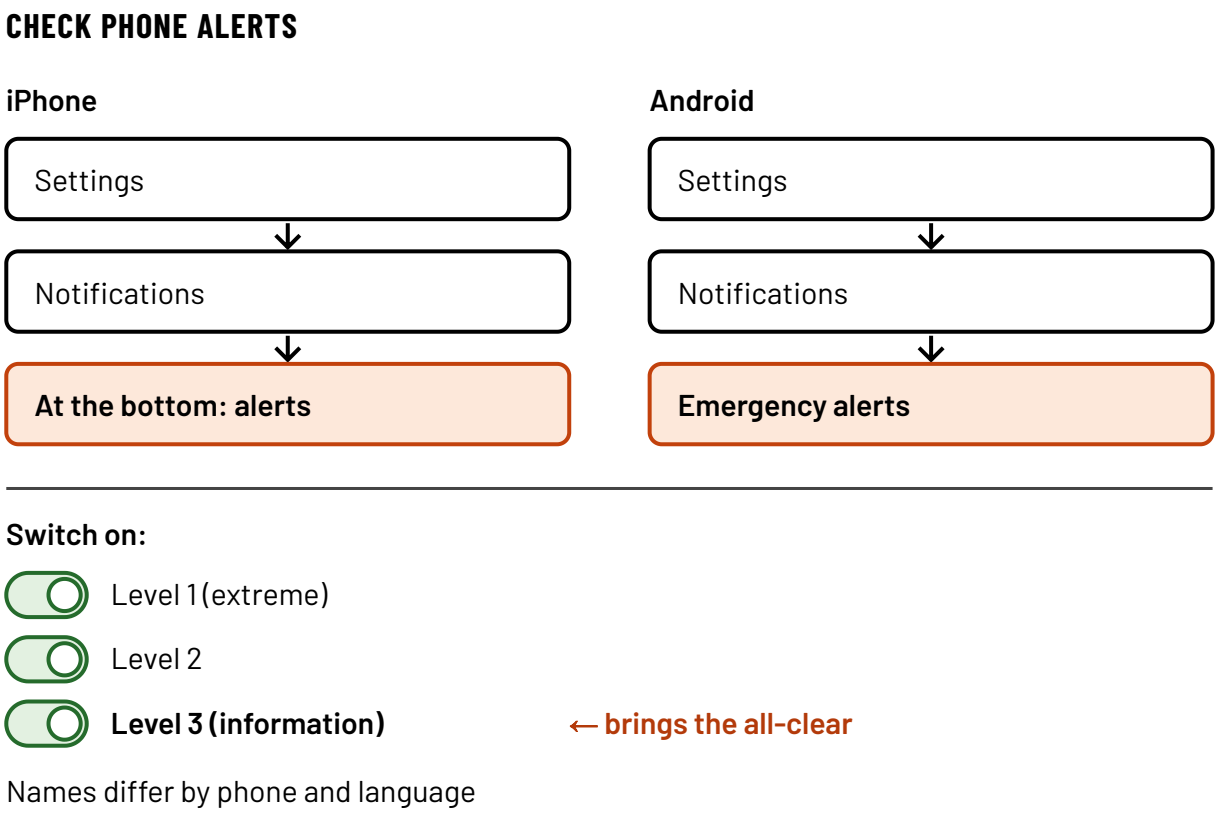
1. Open **Settings** (Einstellungen) and choose **Notifications** (Mitteilungen).
2. Scroll right to the bottom. That is where the alerts are (for example "Cell Broadcast Alerts").
3. Switch on **"Extreme Gefahr"** (extreme danger) and **"Gefahreninformationen"** (hazard information).

Android

1. Open **Settings** and choose **Notifications**.
2. Open **"Notfallbenachrichtigungen für Mobilgeräte"** (wireless emergency alerts). Depending on the device, you can also find it through the messages app or by searching the settings for "emergency".
3. Switch on **"Extreme Gefahr"**, **"Erhebliche Gefahr"** (significant danger) and **"Gefahreninformation"** (hazard information).

According to the leaflet you don't need to switch on "test alerts"; they are for the network operators' internal tests. The lowest level is what matters most: the BBK explicitly recommends keeping warning

level 3 switched on so that the all-clear reaches you too. And **install system updates** – without current software, the all-clear doesn't arrive quietly but with the loud alert tone (BBK).



Setting up phone alerts, schematic: on the iPhone, Settings, Notifications, alerts at the very bottom. On Android, Settings, Notifications, emergency alerts. Switch on: level 1 extreme, level 2, level 3 information. Names differ by device and language.

Dismissed an alert by mistake? On Android devices, received alerts are kept in an archive (where, depends on the device). iPhones have no such archive (BBK). In that case you can find the warning on warnung.bund.de/meldungen – all-clears stay there for six hours (BBK).

Setting up a warning app

Phone alerts are only sent in special danger situations (BBK guide) and are short. That is why the BBK recommends also installing the NINA warning app (BBK). How to set it up well:

- **Subscribe to places:** home and work, plus school or nursery and where your parents or other relatives live. You won't get warnings for other places (BBK).
- **Allow notifications** – for your current location as well, if you like. The location is checked only on the device and isn't stored on a server (BBK).
- **Get warnings from the lowest level:** the BBK recommends switching on civil-protection warnings from "hazard information" (Gefahreninformation).
- **On the iPhone** the BBK also advises: in the notification settings for NINA, allow "Critical Alerts" (so a warning can be heard in Do Not Disturb mode), switch on "Critical Alarm" in the app under civil-protection warnings, turn on background app refresh, set location to "Always", and in the

App Store settings turn off "Offload Unused Apps". For reliable warnings in everyday life it recommends turning off Low Power Mode.

- **On Android** the BBK publishes its own guide to notifications and battery settings – the link is on the BBK's NINA page.

In Bereitsein you choose up to six districts or independent cities under Warnings – for example home, work, school and relatives. Bereitsein loads the official warnings from NINA when you open the app. In the Android app it also checks in the background about every 30 minutes when notifications are on, and tells you about new warnings – Android may delay this to save battery. The latest status is saved and can be read without a network. For immediate, round-the-clock warnings you still need Cell Broadcast and a warning app. Bereitsein's warnings cover Germany only.

Radio: your link to the outside world

When the mobile network and internet are down, warning apps and phone alerts go down with them – but radio stations keep working (BBK guide). That is why every household should have a **battery, solar or wind-up radio**, with spare batteries (BBK guide). The car radio counts too.

- **Note your stations:** write down the frequencies of your local stations and keep the note with your radio and torch, where you can find it in the dark (UK Government, Be Ready). Some towns name the stations they use for information on their website – Münster, for example, names two local stations (City of Münster).
- **Backup power at the transmitter:** some stations are well protected. In Bavaria, for example, the large transmitter sites of Bayerischer Rundfunk have diesel for seven days (City of Nuremberg). Your station can tell you how things stand where you live.
- **Phone as a radio?** Radio apps that stream over the internet go down with the network. A separate radio is the safe choice. More on radio in a power cut: Power cut.

Contacts and agreements

In an emergency the whole family is rarely in one place. So you need agreements that work without a network too.

- **A contact person outside the region:** everyone in the household checks in with them. They collect the messages and know who is where (FEMA, Government of Canada). The family plan has a dedicated contact for this.
- **Numbers on paper:** a printed or handwritten list helps if you can't get at your stored contacts (BBK guide). It should include family, neighbours, doctor, care service, property management, the electricity network operator and emergency numbers (Verbraucherzentrale). Keep copies in your wallet, in the car, at work and in the grab bag, and look over the plan once a year (FEMA).
- **Meeting points:** agree on places where you meet if you can't reach each other (UK Government, Be Ready). How to choose three good meeting points is in the guide Evacuation and family plan.
- **"If nobody can be reached":** in one or two sentences in the family plan, write down what each person does then – in a way children understand. For example: go to meeting point 1 and wait there on the hour, leave a note with the time and destination, check in with the contact person

as soon as possible. Fixed times mean nobody has to wait all day or keep their phone switched on.

- **A message template:** think about what belongs in a short message: who, how you are, where you are, what happens next. The same goes for calls: keep it short and give only vital information (Government of Canada). For example: "I'm OK. At work. Going to meeting point 2."
- **Share the plan:** print the family plan or pass it from phone to phone by QR code, no internet needed.

Battery and power for your phone

- **Power bank:** charged, with the right cable. It lets you charge your phone or laptop during a power cut (BBK guide). Recharge power banks, rechargeable batteries and spare batteries regularly, especially when storms are forecast (Verbraucherzentrale). Solar chargers are a useful addition (BBK).
- **Keep devices charged:** phone, laptop and cordless phones (BBK).
- **Stay reachable:** if a crisis affects you, keep your phone able to receive calls and messages at night too (BBK guide).
- **When power runs short:** use devices sparingly until you can recharge, and avoid the phone's torch – it drains the battery faster; use a real torch instead (UK Government, Be Ready). Get your information from the radio then.

More tips on phones in a power cut are in the guide Power cut.

Landline and internet phone in a power cut

The old analogue landline used to keep working for several hours in a power cut. Now that calls run over the internet (Voice over IP), the router, fibre connection and phone all need power – when it goes, the phone at home falls silent (BBK power cut, Verbraucherzentrale). Services such as **home emergency alarms** (Hausnotruf) can also be disrupted or fail (BBK power cut). If you rely on one, ask your provider what happens in a power cut, and agree with relatives and neighbours who will check on you.

In the UK, vulnerable customers – for example telecare users – should get a free back-up battery from their provider that keeps a landline working for at least an hour in a power cut (UK Government, Be Ready).

Know your municipality's help points

It helps to know where you can get information locally in an emergency – for example at the town hall or an emergency meeting point (BBK guide). Many municipalities in Germany call such help points **disaster lighthouses** (Katastrophenschutz-Leuchttürme); you can also make an emergency call there if the phone network fails (BBK power cut). What they are called and what they offer varies from place to place:

- In **Berlin**, disaster lighthouses only open in a danger situation, such as a long power cut, and the opening is announced separately. They carry a uniform nationwide logo, and emergency calls

can be made there (State of Berlin). In Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg they offer information on the situation and on self-help; emergency calls are passed on to the fire service or police (Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district office).

- In **Baden-Württemberg**, emergency meeting points are meant to offer shelter, first aid, current information and basics such as water and food (Baden-Württemberg Ministry of the Interior).
- In **Nuremberg** they are called emergency information points; they run on backup power and are spread across the city within walking distance (City of Nuremberg). **Münster** has emergency reporting points, for example at fire and police stations (City of Münster).

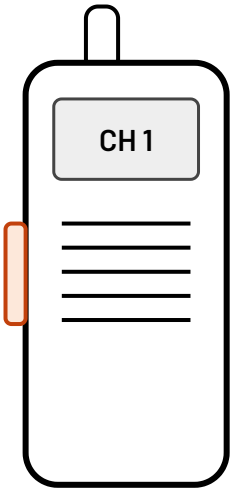
They don't exist everywhere yet – in some Berlin districts they are still being planned or are not yet ready (State of Berlin, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district office). Ask your municipality, print out the location and add it to the family plan as an important place. If you can't make an emergency call and there is no help point: in an emergency, go to the nearest police station or hospital if you can (BBK guide). In the UK the government gives the same advice and adds fire and ambulance stations (UK Government, Be Ready).

Two-way radios: PMR446

If you are close to each other but have no network – in the building, in the neighbourhood, on the way to the meeting point – simple handheld **PMR446** radios can help. The key facts:

- **No registration, no individual licence:** in Germany, the Federal Network Agency has assigned the 446.0 to 446.2 MHz band "for use by the general public" (general assignment Vfg. 91/2025, valid until the end of 2035). Across Europe, PMR446 radios are exempt from individual licensing; anyone may use them and take them across borders (ECC).
- **Low power, built-in antenna:** at most 500 milliwatts. Only hand-portable devices with a built-in antenna are allowed – no base station, no repeater, no network (Federal Network Agency, ECC).
- **Short range:** the radios are designed for short distances, device to device (Federal Network Agency, ECC). How far they reach depends a lot on buildings and terrain – try it out.
- **Shared channels:** analogue radios use channels 12.5 kHz apart, which gives 16 channels in the band (ECC). Everyone shares the same frequencies without coordination, and on any one channel only one person can talk at a time while the others listen (ECC).

PMR446 AT A GLANCE



- ✓ **Licence-free in Europe**
- 446.0–446.2 MHz
- Max. 500 mW
- Built-in antenna only
- ✗ **No repeater, no network**
- 16 analogue channels
- Only one talks at a time

Agree on a channel
and write it down

PMR446 at a glance: licence-free, 446.0 to 446.2 megahertz, at most 500 milliwatts, built-in antenna, no repeater, 16 analogue channels, only one person talks at a time. Agree on a channel in advance and write it down.

How to use them: agree on a channel in advance and write it down – for example in the family plan under "If nobody can be reached" and on the note in the grab bag. Switching on at fixed times saves batteries. Keep spare batteries with them and test the radios now and then. Everyone shares the channels – anyone nearby can listen, so don't pass on anything confidential.

Amateur (ham) radio is something different: in Germany you need an exam with the Federal Network Agency, a licence and your own call sign. Since June 2024 there have been dedicated call signs for members of emergency organisations who use amateur radio in emergencies and disasters (Federal Network Agency). It's not a must for family preparedness.

Variations for your household

With a hearing impairment

- Sirens and radio may not reach you, or only poorly – which makes **phone alerts and a warning app** all the more important. Cell Broadcast combines sound, a visual signal and vibration (BBK).
- The official German emergency-call app **nora** lets you make an emergency call without speaking. Register in advance (BBK guide).
- **Smoke alarms with vibration and light alerts** are available for people with hearing impairments (BBK guide).
- An **emergency ID card** can show how people can communicate with you; pen and paper help when talking to emergency services (BBK guide).
- The BBK also offers information on warnings in **German Sign Language** (BBK).

- Talk to neighbours and family about how they can let you know in an emergency (BBK guide).
- In the UK: if accessibility notifications are switched on, Emergency Alerts use sound and vibration to alert people who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind or partially sighted (GOV.UK).

With a visual impairment

- Radio, and the sound and vibration of phone alerts, don't need a look at the screen (BBK). Check whether your phone's accessibility settings read alerts aloud.
- Spare batteries and chargers for assistive devices belong in your preparations (BBK guide).
- Think about who will support you if you can't use escape routes on your own (BBK guide).

With children

- **Before the warning day,** talk to children and explain that it's only a test (BBK).
- **Ask about the school's or nursery's emergency plan,** and decide who may pick the children up if you can't (Government of Canada).
- **Children know their contact details:** name, address and a phone number (Government of Canada). A note with numbers goes in the school bag. Be honest about what it's about and make the plan together (Government of Canada). More in the guide Children in a crisis.

Older people and people who need care

- **Check your parents' phone:** older devices may not receive Cell Broadcast (Federal Government). Also subscribe to their home town in your own warning app.
- **Pass on warnings:** not everyone may have received the information (BBK guide). Agree with neighbours who checks on whom, especially people who live alone (UK Government, Be Ready).
- Loud warning signals can frighten older people too – let them know before the warning day (BBK).
- More in the guides Care & pets and Helping your neighbours.

If German isn't your first language

- **Phone alerts** in Germany come in German and English (BBK). The most important content of the **NINA** app is available in Arabic, English, French, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Turkish, plus German in Easy Language (BBK).
- The **BBK preparedness guide** is being translated into seven languages, plus Easy Language and German Sign Language (BBK, 10/2025).
- People who have fled war may find loud warning signals especially distressing. The BBK advises preparing them before the warning day (BBK).

With pets

- Prepare animals for loud, sudden noises before the warning day (BBK).

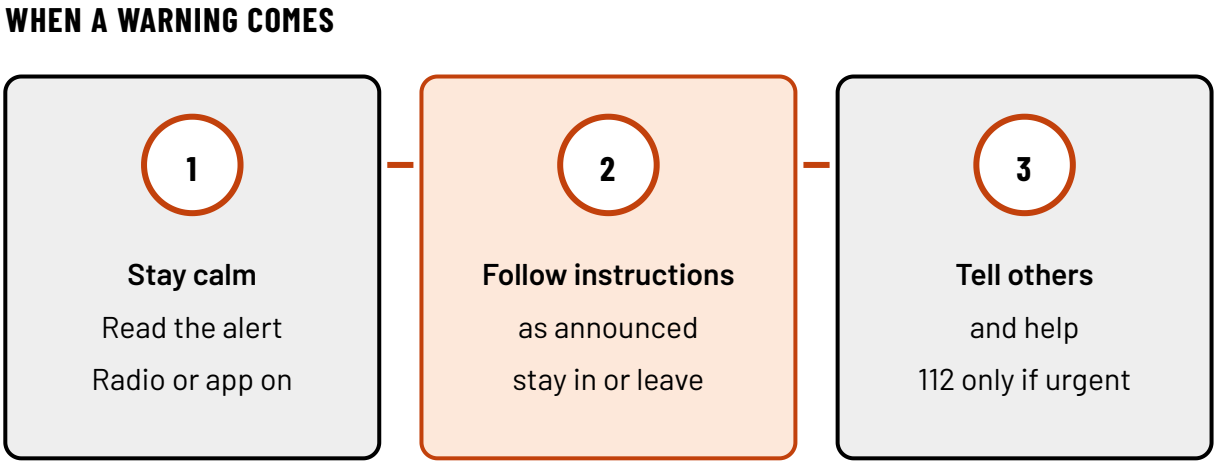
Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Cell Broadcast", "Cell Broadcast: Technische Informationen", "Cell Broadcast: Entwarnung", "Warn-App NINA", "Warn-App NINA – Einstellung für iOS", "Bundesweiter Warntag", "Emergency information sources for international visitors", BBK press release (10/2025), BBK "Stromausfall – Vorsorge und Selbsthilfe", BBK "Vorsorge und Handeln bei Stromausfall", district of Gütersloh (12/2022), Federal Government (9/2026), Federal Network Agency Vfg. 91/2025 and "Amateurfunk", ECC/DEC/(15)05, Verbraucherzentrale (1/2026), State of Berlin, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district office, Baden-Württemberg Ministry of the Interior (9/2022), City of Nuremberg (9/2026), City of Münster, FEMA, Government of Canada (9/2025), UK Government "Be Ready", GOV.UK "Emergency Alerts".

IN AN EMERGENCY

When a warning comes

Every official warning includes advice on what to do – suited to the situation (BBK). So read first, then act:

1. **Stay calm and read the warning.** Follow the short instructions in the message as far as you can (BBK).
2. **Find out more.** A phone alert has only a few characters. Switch on the radio (local station), open the warning app or warnung.bund.de (BBK).
3. **Follow the instructions.** Depending on the situation, for example: with toxic smoke, go into a closed room and shut windows and doors; leave buildings that are at risk of collapse; keep away from damaged power poles (BBK).
4. **In the car or on a bike,** don't read the alert while moving. Stop somewhere safe first – or listen to the radio (GOV.UK).
5. **Tell others.** Pass official warnings on to neighbours, friends and family – not everyone may have received them (BBK guide). Help people who need help (City of Münster).
6. **Keep the emergency lines free.** Only call 110 or 112 in a real emergency, not for information (City of Münster).
7. **Stay reachable** and keep your phone able to receive at night too (BBK guide).



When a warning comes, in three steps: 1. Stay calm, read the alert, switch on the radio or app. 2. Follow the authorities' instructions. 3. Tell others and help, call 112 only if it is urgent.

When the siren sounds

The siren only says: there is a danger. What is going on, you find out from the radio, an app or announcements. The City of Münster describes the steps like this:

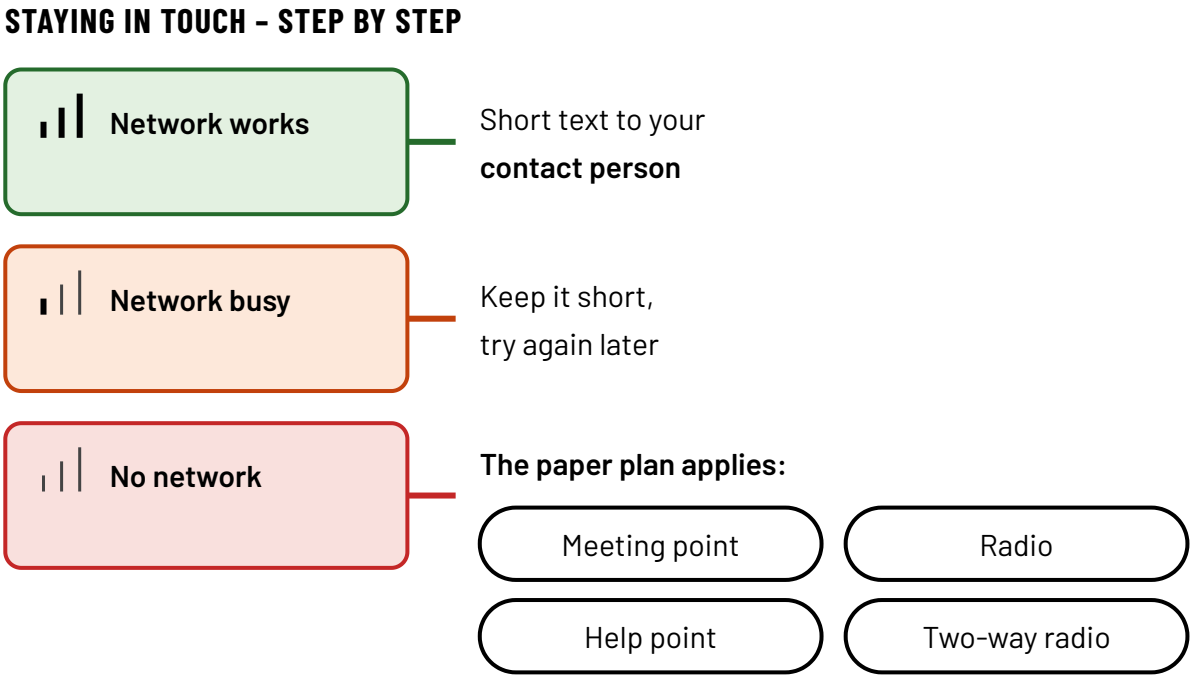
1. Stay calm.
2. Go into a building.
3. Inform your neighbours.
4. Close doors and windows, switch off air conditioning and ventilation.
5. Switch on the radio – in a power cut, a car or battery radio.
6. Help people who need help and children, take in passers-by.
7. Don't block 110 and 112 with enquiries.

If the warning says something different – for example to leave an area – the warning applies. How an evacuation works is in the guide Evacuation and family plan.

Reaching your family

1. **One short text to the contact person** – not to everyone individually, and text rather than call (FEMA, Government of Canada). Under Emergency, Bereitsein sends a text to the mobile numbers in your plan with one tap, with your location if you like.
2. **Only the essentials:** who, how you are, where you are, where you are going. If you have to call, keep it short (Government of Canada).
3. **Don't keep redialling.** Keep calls to the essentials – it frees up the network for emergency calls (BBK power cut).
4. **No signal?** Moving a short distance can improve the signal. If Wi-Fi still works, Wi-Fi calling might work too (UK Government, Be Ready).

5. **Nobody reachable?** Then your plan applies: "If nobody can be reached", meeting point, fixed times. Nobody needs to be reachable for everyone to know where to go.



Staying in touch step by step: if the network works, a short text to the contact person. If it is busy, keep it short and try again later. If nothing works, the paper plan applies: meeting point, radio, help point, two-way radio nearby.

When the network is down completely

- **Radio** is now your source of information. Switching on at fixed times saves batteries. Pass on what you hear – not everyone has a radio.
- **Go to the meeting point** as agreed. Leave a note: who, when, where to.
- **Two-way radios** for short distances: on the agreed channel, at the agreed times.
- **Be seen and heard:** if you are trapped or need to attract attention, your phone flashes SOS with its light or sounds a whistle under Signal – no network needed.
- **Emergency call without a phone:** go to your municipality's help point, otherwise to the nearest police station or hospital (BBK guide, BBK power cut).

Rumours and false reports

In unclear situations, contradictory and false information circulates, especially on social media – some of it is spread deliberately. The more dramatic a report, the faster it is shared (BBK guide). So: **check before you forward.** Who published it first? Is the source reputable – is there an imprint with a name and address? Are facts backed up (BBK guide)? Rely on official warnings: a phone alert names the authority that sent it, and all warnings can be checked on warnung.bund.de (BBK). In the UK, the Emergency Alerts service will never email you or ask for personal details (GOV.UK).

Emergency calls

A power cut or a warning on its own is **not an emergency**. During past power cuts in Germany, the emergency number was often dialled for information, and real emergency calls were delayed (BBK power cut). Only call 110 or 112 when there really is danger. How an emergency call works and what the control centre will ask is in the guide First aid.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025), BBK "Cell Broadcast", "Wann und wovor warnen deutsche Behörden?", BBK "Stromausfall – Vorsorge und Selbsthilfe", City of Münster, GOV.UK "Emergency Alerts", UK Government "Be Ready", FEMA, Government of Canada (9/2025).

AFTERWARDS

The all-clear

- **Siren:** one minute of steady tone (BBK).
- **Phone:** since 25 November 2025, the all-clear in Germany is also sent by Cell Broadcast. It is always sent at the lowest level, "hazard information", so that it is quieter – the subject line reads "ENTWARNUNG" (or "ALL CLEAR" if your phone is set to English). It is a little shorter than the warning and doesn't link to the original message (BBK).
- **No all-clear received?** That can happen if you left the radio cell, switched off warning level 3, your phone was off or in flight mode, or you were in a dead spot. The other way round, you can get an all-clear without ever having received the warning – because you were somewhere else when the warning went out (BBK). If in doubt: warnung.bund.de/meldungen or the radio.
- **All-clear doesn't mean "everything is back to normal".** Disruption can continue, and after-effects can make a new warning necessary. Stay alert (BBK).

Restocking and improving

1. **Charge and restock:** charge your power bank and phone, replace batteries in radio, torch and two-way radios.
2. **Sit down together:** what worked? Did the warning reach everyone? Who couldn't be reached, and why?
3. **Update the plan:** numbers, contact person, meeting points, radio channel – change them in the family plan, print it again and share it again by QR code.
4. **Give feedback:** after the nationwide warning day, the BBK runs an online survey about people's experiences (Federal Government).
5. **Practise:** repeat the "Radio and warning check" in the Drill section by the next warning day at the latest.

Sources for this section: BBK "Sirenen", "Cell Broadcast: Entwarnung", BBK press release (11/2025), "Wann und wovor warnen deutsche Behörden?", Federal Government (9/2026).

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Relying on your phone alone.** Without power and network there are no phone alerts, no app, no internet radio.
- **Switching off the lowest warning level** – then you miss the all-clear too.
- **Putting off system updates.** Older software may not receive Cell Broadcast.
- **Only using your current location in the warning app** and not subscribing to home, school or your parents' town.
- **Calling 110 or 112 when the siren sounds to ask what is going on.** It blocks the line for real emergencies.
- **Everyone calling everyone,** again and again, instead of one short text to the contact person.
- **Keeping numbers only in your phone.** When the battery is flat, they are gone.
- **No radio in the house** – or only one that runs off the mains.
- **Forwarding rumours** before checking the source.
- **Ticking everything off straight after the all-clear.** After-effects and new warnings are possible.
- **Buying two-way radios but never agreeing on a channel,** and leaving them in a cupboard with flat batteries.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Phone system updates installed
- [ ] Cell Broadcast switched on, including "hazard information"
- [ ] Warning app installed, notifications allowed
- [ ] Places subscribed: home, work, school or nursery, relatives
- [ ] Districts chosen in Bereitsein under "Warnings"
- [ ] Battery, solar or wind-up radio with spare batteries
- [ ] Local station frequency written down, kept with the radio
- [ ] Everyone in the household knows the siren signals
- [ ] Asked the municipality about local sirens and special signals
- [ ] Contact person outside the region asked and added
- [ ] Phone numbers on paper – wallet, grab bag, school bag
- [ ] "If nobody can be reached" agreed, with fixed times
- [ ] Meeting points agreed
- [ ] Power bank charged, with cable
- [ ] Home emergency alarm: checked with the provider what happens in a power cut
- [ ] Municipal help point or emergency meeting point known
- [ ] If you have them: PMR446 radios, channel agreed, spare batteries

- [ ] School or nursery emergency plan asked about
- [ ] Parents' phone and warning app checked
- [ ] "Radio and warning check" done, repeat on the next warning day

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All links checked on 5 November 2026.

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CHAPTER 9

HYGIENE AND EMERGENCY TOILET

When water or sewage systems fail – when not to flush, how to build an emergency toilet, keep your hands clean with little water and handle rubbish, nappies and laundry safely.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

DO NOW

1. If an outage is announced – fill the bath, buckets and containers for the toilet and washing
2. Only flush if the waste water drains away and the authorities say nothing else
3. Emergency toilet – two sturdy bags in the toilet or a bucket, litter on top after each use, lid closed
4. Wash your hands with soap after the toilet and before eating, otherwise use hand sanitiser
5. Tie full bags with little air inside, put them in another bag, store them protected and out of the way

When no more water comes out of the tap or the waste water no longer drains away, you quickly notice how much of everyday life depends on the tap and the flush. With a few supplies and simple steps you can still keep things clean – and that is exactly what protects you from diarrhoea and other infections, especially when doctors' surgeries and pharmacies are hard to reach.

AT A GLANCE

- **Hands matter most:** after the toilet, before eating, after changing a nappy – with soap for 20 to 30 seconds. Without water and soap: hand sanitiser with at least 60 % alcohol.
- **Don't always flush:** if only the water is off, you can flush with non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket. If the authorities say the sewer system isn't working, or waste water is backing up, don't flush.
- **Emergency toilet:** line the toilet bowl or a bucket with two sturdy bin bags, put cat litter or sawdust in, a little litter on top after each use, lid closed.
- **Store bags safely:** tie them with little air inside and keep them protected and away from food until your local council says where they go.
- **A small hygiene supply** is enough: soap, disinfectant, wet wipes, toilet paper, large bin bags, household gloves, period products and nappies if needed.

START SMALL

You don't need a big shopping trip for an emergency toilet and a hygiene supply. Much of it is already in your home. Pick one of these tasks each day – none takes longer than ten minutes:

- **Test your bags:** does a bin bag from your cupboard fit over the rim of your toilet bowl? If not, put large, sturdy bags on your shopping list.
- **Find a bucket with a lid** – one that is set aside just for emergencies. It becomes your emergency toilet if the bowl should not be used.
- **Get some litter:** a pack of cat litter or a bag of sawdust lasts a long time. If you have a cat, simply keep one extra bag.
- **Check soap and sanitiser:** is there soap in your supplies? Does your hand sanitiser contain at least 60 % alcohol? It says so on the label.
- **Set out a water container** with a tap – it becomes a handwashing station.
- **Look at the main water tap and the cellar:** where do you turn the water off? Is there a backflow valve or a lifting unit (sewage pump) in the cellar? Note both under Where's what.
- **See what's missing:** the hygiene items are in the equipment list of the supplies calculator – tick off what you already have.

UNDERSTANDING

In Germany, clean water and working toilets are so much taken for granted that we rarely think about them. It is worth knowing how things fit together once – then the steps in an emergency feel logical rather than like an imposition.

Why hygiene matters so much in an emergency

The BBK puts it clearly: poor hygiene is the trigger for many epidemics and diseases worldwide. To us this seems far away, because showering, brushing our teeth and washing our hands every day are a matter of course. But when the water fails, a lot depends on hygiene – and hand washing remains very important even when water is scarce.

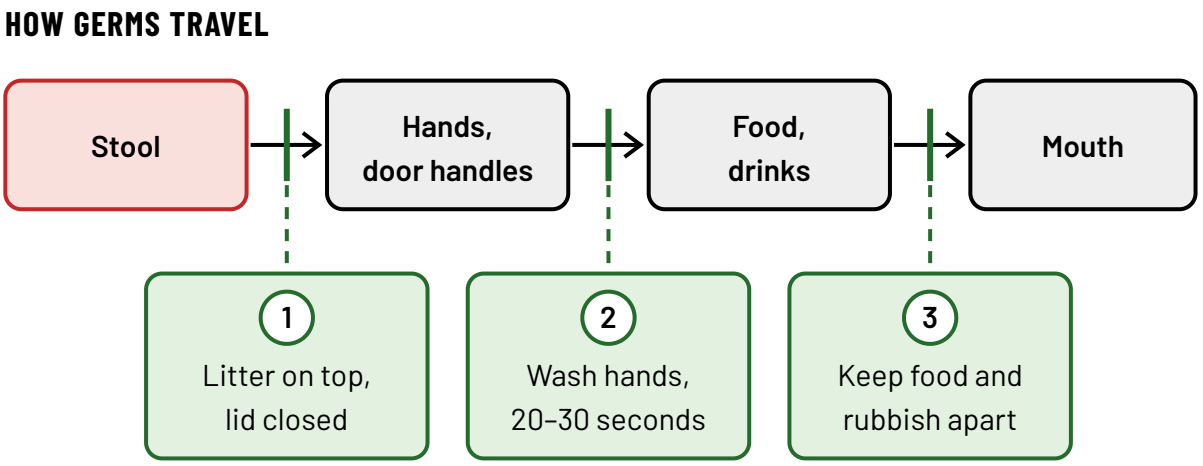
The World Health Organization (WHO) links poor sanitation with diarrhoeal diseases such as cholera and dysentery, as well as typhoid, intestinal worm infections and polio. According to the WHO, around 1.4 million people die each year as a result of unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene – mostly in low- and middle-income countries. That is not the situation in Germany. But it shows what toilets, sewers and soap quietly do for us every day.

The German Environment Agency (UBA) also explicitly names the risks when the water supply is interrupted: restrictions on personal hygiene, no toilet flushing and failure of the sewer system. That is why a health authority weighs up any interruption very carefully.

How germs travel

Many stomach and gut infections spread as **smear infections**: tiny, invisible traces of stool or vomit get onto hands, food or drinks – and from there into the mouth. Toilets, door handles, handrails and taps can also be contaminated (Infektionsschutz.de). Even a tiny amount of stool can contain millions of germs (CDC).

The good news: you can break this chain at several points – with a covered toilet, with hand washing and with clean handling of food and rubbish.



Often invisible: tiny traces are enough

Path of germs: from stool via hands and surfaces to food and mouth. Three points break it: cover the toilet and close the lid, wash hands, keep food and rubbish apart.

When the toilet stops working

There are two different problems, and they call for different solutions:

1. **No water comes out, but the waste water drains away.** Then you can keep using the toilet and flush it with non-drinking water that you collected beforehand in the bath, washbasin, buckets and containers. The BBK explicitly advises remembering water for flushing the toilet when you collect water.
2. **The waste water no longer drains away, or the sewer must not be loaded.** Then flushing water does not help – quite the opposite.

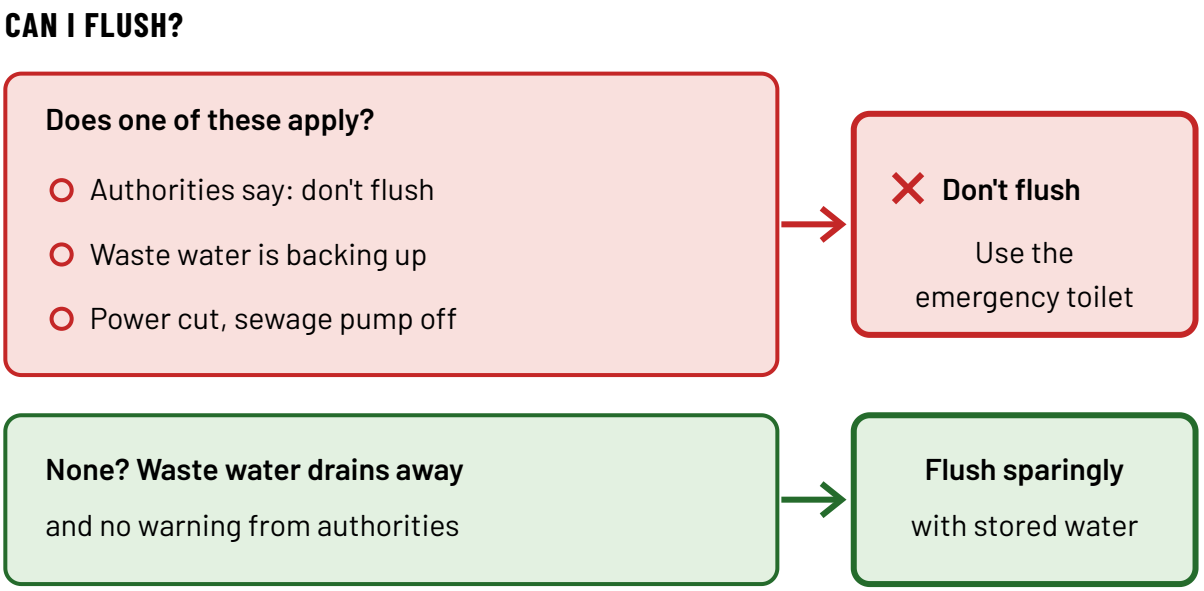
When the second problem occurs, sources from several countries agree:

- **Power cut:** waste water also needs pumps and lifting stations. If they fail, waste water cannot be transported to the treatment plant, and streets and cellars can be flooded (City of Wels, Austria). The Finnish National Rescue Association (SPEK) therefore advises not to flush during a power cut and not to drain water into the sewer until the power is back. How it is where you live depends on the area: some networks work with natural gradients and backup power. So ask

your local council whether waste water disposal will work in an emergency (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior).

- **Backflow during heavy rain or floods:** dirty water from the sewer can be pushed back into the building (Verbraucherzentrale). When the backflow valve is closed, waste water from a toilet or washing machine below the backflow level cannot drain away – they cannot be used then (City of Passau).
- **Damaged pipes:** after a large earthquake, the emergency management office in Wellington (New Zealand) advises not to flush – even if water is still running – because the waste water pipes are likely to be broken.
- **Instructions from the authorities:** if your council, the sewage operator or the fire brigade tell you not to flush, that applies.

A **lifting unit in your own cellar** needs electricity. A backup generator can make sense for such units (City of Wels).



Decision path: do the authorities say don't flush, or is waste water backing up, or has the sewage pump stopped in a power cut? Then don't flush and use the emergency toilet. Otherwise you may flush sparingly with non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket.

How much water hygiene needs

If a health authority has to shut off the mains, the UBA recommendation says at least **20 litres per inhabitant per day** should be provided, for example by tanker. According to the UBA, this amount only covers drinking, cooking and personal hygiene – **toilet flushing is not included**. This shows: without flushing you manage with much less water. So an emergency toilet does not just save water, it is what makes it possible to stay clean with little water at all.

For your drinking water supply itself, plan 2 litres per person per day. How to store drinking and non-drinking water and what applies during a boil-water notice is in the guide Drinking water.

Sources for this section: BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK guide English edition (12/2018), Heilbronn fire brigade (leaflet based on BBK), WHO "Sanitation" (11/2026), UBA recommendation on §§ 62–68 TrinkwV (2/2026), Infektionsschutz.de "Magen-Darm-Infektionen", CDC "Personal Hygiene During an Emergency" (8/2024), City of Wels "Blackout", SPEK (12/2022), oesterreich.gv.at "Verhalten bei Blackout" (2/2026), Verbraucherzentrale "Starkregen-Überflutung und Rückstau" (8/2026), City of Passau "Rückstau aus dem Kanalnetz" (2/2015), WREMO "Emergency toilets".

PREPARING

Your hygiene supply

The BBK recommends that every household should be able to look after itself for **ten days** if possible – water, food, medical care and hygiene. A supply for three days already helps a lot. Under **Hygiene**, the BBK checklist lists:

- toothpaste and toothbrushes
- soap
- personal hygiene items, for example period products and nappies
- bin bags, **including large, sturdy ones to hang in the toilet**
- toilet paper
- disinfectant
- laundry detergent
- wet wipes
- kitchen roll
- household gloves
- camping toilet

On its page "Hygiene in Notsituationen", the BBK adds disinfectant wipes, replacement bags or fluid for the camping toilet, and – as products that need little or no water – dry shampoo and hand-cleaning pastes. For times when water is short, the BBK recommends **disposable crockery and cutlery** so that no water is needed for washing up. The home medicine cabinet should also contain skin and wound disinfectant, disposable gloves, remedies for diarrhoea and electrolytes to replace lost fluids.

The BBK does not give fixed amounts for soap or toilet paper. A good approach: check what your household uses in ten days – that is how long the BBK suggests your supplies should last if possible – and keep that much extra in the cupboard. The hygiene items are in the equipment list of the supplies calculator; whatever is missing goes on the shopping list and comes in bit by bit with your normal shopping.

HYGIENE SUPPLY

Hands and body

- [ ] Soap
- [ ] Disinfectant
- [ ] Wet and disinfectant wipes
- [ ] Toothbrush, toothpaste

Toilet

- [ ] Large, sturdy bin bags
- [ ] Cat litter, sawdust
- [ ] Toilet paper
- [ ] Bucket with a lid

Household

- [ ] Kitchen roll
- [ ] Household gloves
- [ ] Laundry detergent
- [ ] Disposable crockery

Personal

- [ ] Period products
- [ ] Nappies, baby wipes
- [ ] Medicines
- [ ] Litter for the cat

Aim for 10 days – 3 days help

Hygiene supply following the BBK checklist in four groups: hands and body with soap, disinfectant, wet wipes, toothbrush and toothpaste; toilet with large bin bags, litter, toilet paper and a bucket with a lid; household with kitchen roll, gloves, laundry detergent and disposable crockery; personal with period products, nappies and medicines.

Supplies for the emergency toilet

An emergency toilet is quickly set up if everything is kept together in one place – ideally in or next to the bucket you have set aside for it:

- **Sturdy, large bin bags** that fit over the rim of the toilet bowl or bucket. You always need two at once, plus more for wrapping full bags.
- **A bucket with a lid.** Finnish municipalities recommend a **bucket with a lid of about 10 litres** for longer power cuts; the emergency management office in Wellington mentions sturdy 15 to 20 litre buckets.
- **Litter to absorb:** cat litter, sawdust or fireplace ash (King County, USA); dry leaves, shredded newspaper or egg cartons are also mentioned (WREMO, SPEK). Sweden's crisis information service also lists plastic bags, compost bedding or sawdust and a bucket with a lid. The litter keeps the contents dry and the smell down (WREMO).
- **Toilet paper**, household gloves, disinfectant and somewhere to wash hands right next to it.
- **Alternative – camping toilet:** the BBK mentions a camping toilet with replacement bags or fluid. It is more comfortable but not necessary.

A handwashing station

Next to the emergency toilet there should be a place to wash hands with soap, water and paper towels (King County). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend setting up a **handwashing station with a large water jug** if clean tap water is not available. A container with a tap works well, with a bucket or bowl underneath to catch the water. If water still comes out of the tap but the sewer should be spared, wash your hands over a bucket and only empty it when the power is back (SPEK).

So have ready: a water container, soap (liquid soap is more hygienic than a bar, says Infektionsschutz.de), paper towels or a personal towel for each person, a catch bucket and hand sanitiser as a backup.

Variations for your household

- **Flat:** without a garden, the only way is sealed bags. Plan a protected place for full bags – for example a bucket with a lid on the balcony, in the cellar or a storeroom, away from food. During a power cut, the water supply also depends on which floor you live on (BBK) – so on upper floors the emergency toilet may be needed sooner.
- **House with a cellar:** the BBK recommends protecting the house from sewer water with a **backflow protection device**; a lifting unit can also pump waste water out against backflow. If a toilet, shower or washing machine is below street level, according to the Verbraucherzentrale only a **lifting unit** gives adequate protection; a backflow valve only stops water from the sewer getting in. Both must be serviced regularly. Unused drains in the cellar should be sealed. More in the guide Floods and heavy rain.
- **With a baby or toddler:** keep nappies, wet wipes and sealable bags for full nappies and dirty clothes in your supplies. The CDC lists at least one large pack of nappies and two packs of wipes, plus nappy cream and disposable cups, plates and spoons. Bottles, teats and sippy cups are hard to keep clean without safe water. The CDC considers **ready-to-feed formula** the safest formula option in an emergency because it doesn't need mixing, and **disposable cups** need no cleaning. According to the CDC, breastfeeding is the safest way to feed a baby during a disaster. Which water is suitable for baby food is in the guide Drinking water.
- **With care needs:** the BBK advises making arrangements so that you can care for relatives who need care yourself for a while if necessary, and – if relatives live in a care home – asking there about its backup power planning. Think of the personal hygiene items used every day, disposable gloves and hand sanitiser. Hand sanitiser can be useful where there is a higher risk of infection or contact with particularly vulnerable people (Infektionsschutz.de).
- **With pets:** for cats, the CDC recommends keeping litter and a litter box in your supplies, plus paper towels, plastic bags and disinfectant for accidents; food and water for two weeks. The bonus: cat litter also works as litter for the emergency toilet. More in the guide People who need care, and pets.

Sources for this section: BBK guide with checklist (11/2025), BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK "Stromausfall" (2026), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), Krisinformation.se (11/2026),

Heilbronn fire brigade (leaflet based on BBK), Yle/Association of Finnish Municipalities (4/2025), WREMO "Emergency toilets", King County "How to create an emergency toilet", SPEK (12/2022), CDC (2022, 2024, 2026), Infektionsschutz.de "Händewaschen" (6/2025), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026).

IN AN EMERGENCY

When the water fails – the first steps

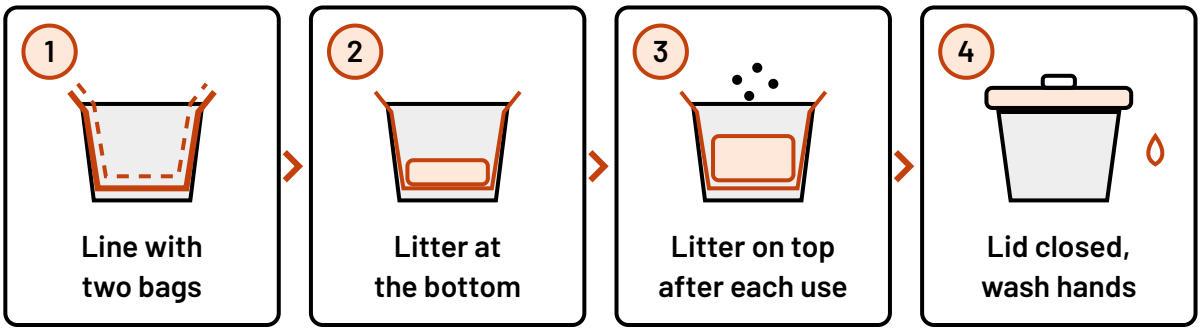
1. **Get informed:** switch on the radio or a warning app. Your water supplier, council and sewage operator will say whether water and sewers are affected. Their instructions come first.
2. **Collect water while it is running:** if a longer outage is announced, fill the bath, washbasin, buckets, pots and containers – as non-drinking water for hygiene and for flushing the toilet (BBK).
3. **Save water:** disposable crockery instead of washing up, wet wipes and disinfectant wipes for hands, kitchen roll instead of a wet cloth, household gloves for cleaning (BBK).
4. **Flush or not?** As described under "Understanding": if the waste water drains away and nobody says otherwise, you may flush with non-drinking water. With backflow, failed sewage pumps or on instruction: don't flush, use the emergency toilet.
5. **During a short power cut:** you can still sit on the toilet. Put used toilet paper in a bin bag so the bowl doesn't block; flush only when the power is back (SPEK).

Setting up an emergency toilet – step by step

This is how the public health department of King County (USA), the Finnish rescue association SPEK and the emergency management office in Wellington describe it – the steps largely match:

1. **Choose a place:** the normal toilet or a bucket in the bathroom – not near the kitchen or where you eat.
2. **Line it twice:** line the toilet bowl or bucket with **two sturdy bin bags**.
3. **Litter at the bottom:** put cat litter, sawdust or shredded newspaper in the bottom of the bags.
4. **Cover after each use:** a handful or a large cupful of litter on top. This keeps the contents dry and the smell down.
5. **Lid closed:** keep the lid and the door closed between uses.
6. **Wash your hands:** straight afterwards at the handwashing station or with hand sanitiser.
7. **Always supervise small children** on the emergency toilet (King County).

EMERGENCY TOILET IN 4 STEPS



Away from kitchen and dining area
Always supervise small children

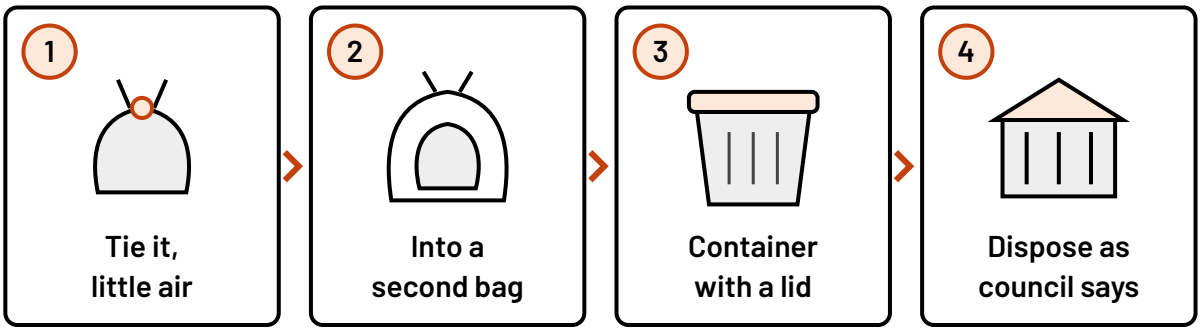
Emergency toilet in four steps: 1. two sturdy bags in the bowl or bucket, 2. litter at the bottom, 3. a handful of litter on top after each use, 4. lid closed and wash hands.

Bucket instead of the toilet bowl: for longer power cuts, Finnish municipalities now recommend a bucket with a lid rather than a bag in the toilet. The reason: the bag can slip into the drain or tear when you lift it out. A bucket is also the right choice if the bathroom can't be reached or the toilet should not be used because of backflow.

Sealing and storing full bags

1. **Don't let them get too full:** a bag can tear when you lift it out (Association of Finnish Municipalities) – the less is in it, the more safely you can lift it out and tie it.
2. **Gloves on:** wear household or disposable gloves when changing bags (WREMO).
3. **Tie with little air inside**, and close the outer bag too. The Finnish rescue association advises putting the sealed bag into **two more plastic bags**.
4. **At the end of each day at the latest**, tie the bags securely and move them to a protected place – for example a garage, cellar or shed (King County).
5. **Keep them separate:** don't mix toilet bags with other household rubbish (WREMO); collect them in their own container with a lid so that neither animals nor pests can get to them.
6. **Dispose of them as your council says:** in Finland the bags go in the general waste, in New Zealand in a bin with a lid; in the USA they may go in household rubbish if the authorities announce it. Where you live: listen for announcements and ask your council or waste service. Rubbish collection may stop at short notice in a crisis (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior) – so plan space for a few days.
7. **Afterwards wash your hands**, rinse the bucket and disinfect it if needed (WREMO).

FULL BAGS: WHAT NEXT



Apart from other rubbish, away from food
Wear gloves, then wash your hands

Full bags: 1. tie with little air inside, 2. put in a second bag, 3. into a container with a lid in a protected place, separate from household rubbish, 4. dispose of as the council says.

Variation: two buckets

After earthquakes, the emergency management office in Wellington recommends a **two-bucket system**: one bucket for urine, one for stool. Kept apart, it smells less and is safer. Label the buckets clearly. Stool, toilet paper and litter go in the stool bucket; in a flat it is lined with a sturdy bag. There, the urine bucket is emptied daily and the stool bucket about every three days or sooner. Where you are allowed to put urine and bags in your area depends on whether sewers and rubbish collection are working – if in doubt, ask.

Washing your hands with little water

When: Infektionsschutz.de names the most important moments: after the toilet, after changing a nappy or helping a child on the toilet, after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing, after contact with rubbish, animals, pet food or animal waste – before eating and before handling medicines – and before and after preparing food, contact with sick people and caring for wounds.

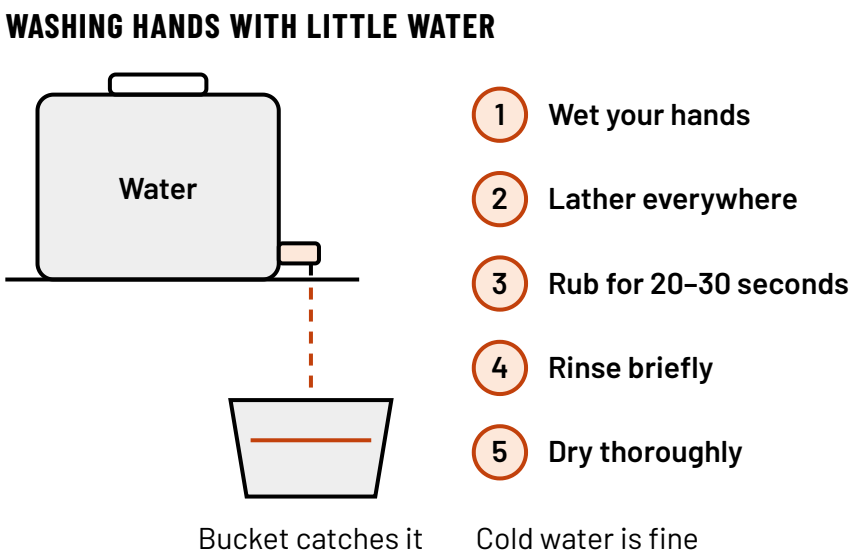
How – at a station with a water container:

1. **Wet:** let a little water from the container run over your hands, with a catch bucket underneath.
2. **Lather thoroughly:** palms, backs of hands, fingertips, between the fingers, thumbs and nails.
3. **Rub gently for 20 to 30 seconds** – about as long as humming a well-known birthday song twice.
4. **Rinse** with a small splash of water.
5. **Dry thoroughly**, including between the fingers – with a paper towel or your own clean towel.

The water temperature makes no difference; cold water is fine. Soap is much more effective than water alone. If you have no soap, still wash your hands with water – that also removes some germs. Change towels regularly and wash them at 60 °C or more (Infektionsschutz.de).

During a boil-water notice, washing hands with tap water may be safe (CDC); the UBA then advises thorough hand washing with plenty of soap. What else applies during a boil-water notice is in the guide

Drinking water.



Washing hands with little water at a container with a tap and a catch bucket: 1. wet, 2. lather, 3. rub for 20 to 30 seconds, 4. rinse, 5. dry.

Soap or hand sanitiser?

Soap and water are the first choice in most situations because they remove all types of germs from hands. **Hand sanitiser** is the answer when soap and water are not available (CDC):

- **At least 60 % alcohol** – it says so on the label.
- **How to use it:** put the amount given on the pack into the palm of one hand, spread it over all surfaces of both hands and rub until your hands are dry – about 20 seconds. Don't wipe or rinse it off before it has dried.
- **Works poorly on visibly dirty or greasy hands.** Remove the dirt first – with soap and water or, when out and about, with cleaning wipes (Infektionsschutz.de, CDC).
- **Less effective against** norovirus, the parasite *Cryptosporidium* and the diarrhoea germ *Clostridioides difficile* – so with vomiting and diarrhoea in the household, pay special attention to soap and water.
- **Does not remove chemicals** such as pesticides or heavy metals.
- **Supervise children** so they don't swallow it.

SOAP OR HAND SANITISER?

Soap and water

First choice whenever possible

Especially with:

- visibly dirty, greasy hands
- diarrhoea in the household
- after chemicals

Hand sanitiser

If soap and water are lacking

- at least 60 % alcohol
- rub over all surfaces
- about 20 seconds
- until dry, don't wipe off

⚠ Supervise children: don't swallow

Soap or sanitiser: soap and water whenever possible, especially with visible dirt, grease, diarrhoea in the household and after contact with chemicals. Hand sanitiser with at least 60 percent alcohol when soap and water are not available, rub in for about 20 seconds until hands are dry.

Washing, teeth, hair

- **Body:** instead of a shower, a flannel, a bowl and soap are enough – non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket is fine for hygiene as long as it isn't contaminated (BBK). Without water, wet wipes, dry shampoo and hand-cleaning paste help (BBK).
- **No water with sewage or chemicals:** don't wash or bathe in water that may be contaminated with sewage, toxic substances or floodwater (CDC).
- **Teeth:** only with clean water – drinking water from your supply or, during a boil-water notice, boiled water (CDC, UBA).
- **During a boil-water notice**, personal hygiene with tap water is possible; cover open wounds with a waterproof plaster. For young children and for sick people or people with weakened immunity, boiled and cooled water should also be used for personal hygiene (UBA). Careful – risk of scalding!
- **Own flannels and towels** for each person; wash at 60 °C or more in case of illness (Infektionsschutz.de).

Periods

Pads, tampons and panty liners belong in your supplies (BBK) and, after use, in the general waste – **not in the toilet**, because they can block the drain and the backflow valve (Verbraucherzentrale, WREMO). Collect them in a separate small bag and close it well. Empty a menstrual cup into the stool bucket of the emergency toilet (WREMO). Wash or disinfect your hands before and after.

Changing nappies

The CDC describes how to do this cleanly even without a changing table and running water. Important: **always keep one hand on the child.**

1. **Prepare:** if possible, cover the surface with a disposable liner. Have a fresh nappy, wipes, cream, a bag for dirty clothes and spare clothes ready.
2. **Clean the child:** with wipes or a clean, damp cloth – always **from front to back**. Put dirty clothes straight into the bag.
3. **Dispose:** put used wipes in the dirty nappy and everything in the bin – tightly closed, away from food.
4. **Fresh nappy** on, dress the child.
5. **Child's hands:** wash with soap and water – without a washing facility, use hand sanitiser, keep hands away from eyes and mouth until dry, and wash with soap later.
6. **Clean up:** remove the liner, wipe off visible dirt, wet the surface with disinfectant following the instructions on the pack.
7. **Your own hands:** wash them – or use sanitiser and wash with soap as soon as possible.

Nappies and wet wipes never go in the toilet (Verbraucherzentrale).

Dishes and laundry

- **Dishes:** when water is short, use disposable crockery and cutlery, and clean plates and work surfaces with kitchen roll instead of a wet cloth (BBK). During a boil-water notice, the dishwasher may be used if it can be set to 60 °C or dries with heat (UBA). If someone has diarrhoea, wash their dishes as hot as possible in the dishwasher (Infektionsschutz.de).
- **Laundry:** laundry detergent belongs in your supplies (BBK). During a boil-water notice, the washing machine is fine at 40 °C or more (UBA). Wash bedding, towels and flannels of sick people at 60 °C or more (Infektionsschutz.de). During backflow, don't use a washing machine below the backflow level (City of Passau). Keep dirty clothes in a closed bag until they can be washed (CDC).

Rubbish and pests

If rubbish collection stops, rubbish stays in the house longer. So produce as little waste as possible and use consumables sparingly (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior). Bin bags help you pack rubbish quickly, even if it isn't collected for a while (BBK).

- **Collect separately:** toilet bags apart from other rubbish (WREMO). Nappies and hygiene products in their own tightly closed bags.
- **Food scraps** go in the household waste, not left lying around and **never down the toilet or sink** – that attracts rats (City of Heidelberg).
- **Close everything well:** keep bins, rubbish bags and pet food tightly closed (City of Heidelberg); keep the emergency toilet lid shut so that flies and rodents can't get in (King County).
- **Away from food:** store it in a protected place.

RUBBISH: SEPARATE AND SEALED



✗ None of it down toilet or sink

✓ Lids closed, away from food

Collect rubbish separately and sealed: toilet bags double-bagged in their own container with a lid, nappies and hygiene products in their own bags, food scraps sealed in the household waste. None of it down the toilet or sink.

Wounds and medicines

- **Before handling medicines** and **before and after caring for wounds**, wash your hands (Infektionsschutz.de) – or disinfect them and use disposable gloves from the medicine cabinet.
- **Clean wounds** with soap and clean water and cover them with a waterproof plaster; during a boil-water notice, use boiled or bottled water for this (CDC, UBA).
- **With open wounds**, stay out of floodwater (CDC).
- **Get medical help** if a wound becomes red, swollen or starts to ooze (CDC).

How to treat injuries is in the guide First aid – which, by the way, is no substitute for a first aid course.

If someone gets diarrhoea

Especially when water is short, it pays to slow down an infection in the household early. Infektionsschutz.de advises:

1. **Hands:** the sick person washes their hands often and thoroughly.
2. **Own toilet:** if possible, use a toilet and bedroom separate from healthy people – with an emergency toilet this means a bucket of their own if possible.
3. **Clean up quickly:** remove vomit and traces of stool promptly, ideally with gloves. Then clean thoroughly.
4. **No cooking:** sick people don't prepare food for others.
5. **Drink plenty:** ideally lightly salted tea or broth in small sips. Electrolytes from the medicine cabinet help replace lost fluids (BBK).
6. **Get medical advice** for babies, toddlers, older people and people with weakened immunity – for them, lack of fluids quickly becomes dangerous. For everyone: with severe circulation

problems, muscle cramps, drowsiness, confusion, high fever, blood in the stool or vomiting and diarrhoea lasting more than three days. Emergency number 112, out-of-hours doctor service 116 117.

Sources for this section: King County "How to create an emergency toilet", SPEK (12/2022), WREMO "Emergency toilets", Yle/Association of Finnish Municipalities (4/2025), BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK guide (11/2025), BBK guide English edition (12/2018), oesterreich.gv.at (2/2026), Infektionsschutz.de "Händewaschen" (6/2025) and "Magen-Darm-Infektionen", CDC "Personal Hygiene During an Emergency" (8/2024), CDC "Hand Sanitizer" (3/2024), CDC nappy changing (2/2022), UBA (2/2026), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026), City of Passau (2/2015), City of Heidelberg (6/2026).

AFTERWARDS

When water and sewers are running again

1. **Wait for the all-clear first:** flush and drain water into the sewer only when the power is back or the authorities allow it (SPEK). Then you can pour the water from the catch bucket down the drain.
2. **Dispose of full bags** – as your council or waste service announces.
3. **Clean bucket and toilet:** rinse with gloves on, clean and disinfect if needed (WREMO). Then wash your hands.
4. **Catch up on laundry:** towels, flannels and bedding – those of sick people at 60 °C or more (Infektionsschutz.de).
5. **Check the cellar:** if there was backflow, have the backflow valve and lifting unit checked; both must be serviced regularly (Verbraucherzentrale). After flooding, the guide Floods and heavy rain helps.

Restocking

Whatever was used up – bags, litter, soap, disinfectant, wet wipes, toilet paper – goes on the shopping list. In the supplies calculator you can tick off what is back.

Learning from it

Sit down together briefly after a few days: did the emergency toilet work? Were there enough bags, and where did they go? Was there somewhere to wash hands everywhere? Did everyone know where the bucket, litter and disinfectant are? Improving one thing is enough – for example getting a second bucket with a lid or a water container with a tap.

Sources for this section: SPEK (12/2022), WREMO "Emergency toilets", Infektionsschutz.de "Magen-Darm-Infektionen", Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026).

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Flushing although the waste water is backed up:** with backflow or failed sewage pumps, the water ends up in the cellar – or your neighbour's.
- **Using only one thin bag:** always two sturdy bags – one on its own tears easily.
- **Letting bags get too full:** then they can hardly be lifted out and tied safely.
- **Forgetting the litter:** without litter it gets wet and smells.
- **Putting toilet bags with the kitchen rubbish:** store them separately, sealed and away from food.
- **Throwing wet wipes, nappies or pads into the toilet:** they block the drain and the backflow valve.
- **Tipping food scraps into the toilet:** that attracts rats.
- **Sanitiser on dirty hands:** remove the dirt first, then disinfect.
- **Only sanitiser during vomiting and diarrhoea:** soap and water work better against norovirus.
- **Brushing teeth with non-drinking water:** use only clean drinking water for that.
- **Leaving small children alone on the emergency toilet.**

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Large, sturdy bin bags that fit over the toilet bowl
- [ ] Bucket with a lid (about 10 to 20 litres) for the emergency toilet
- [ ] Litter: cat litter or sawdust
- [ ] Toilet paper
- [ ] Soap, preferably liquid soap
- [ ] Hand sanitiser with at least 60 % alcohol
- [ ] Wet wipes and disinfectant wipes
- [ ] Household gloves and disposable gloves
- [ ] Kitchen roll and disposable crockery
- [ ] Toothbrushes and toothpaste
- [ ] Laundry detergent
- [ ] Period products
- [ ] With a baby: nappies, wet wipes, bags for full nappies, disposable cups
- [ ] With care needs: personal hygiene items for care, disposable gloves
- [ ] With a cat: litter and litter box
- [ ] Water container with a tap, catch bucket, paper towels as a handwashing station
- [ ] Water containers for non-drinking water (toilet, washing)
- [ ] Protected place for full bags decided

- [ ] Backflow valve or lifting unit in the cellar known and serviced
- [ ] Main water tap found, location noted under Where's what
- [ ] Numbers of council, waste service and sewage operator on paper

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CHAPTER 10

KEEPING WARM WITHOUT HEATING

When electricity, gas or district heating fails in winter – keeping one room warm, dressing and sleeping right, heating safely without carbon monoxide, recognising hypothermia and finding warming rooms.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

DO NOW

1. Turn one room into a warm room, keep the doors closed
2. Put on layers in good time, hat and socks
3. Never use a barbecue, gas stove or generator indoors
4. Drink warm drinks, eat regularly, move often
5. Check on older people and those living alone

In winter, a heating failure is uncomfortable – it usually only becomes dangerous because of what people then do to get warm. With warm clothing, blankets, a well-chosen room and a few rules about carbon monoxide, you can manage well for quite a while. This guide goes deeper than the "Warmth" section of the Power cut guide.

AT A GLANCE

- **Almost every heating system needs electricity** – gas, oil and district heating too, because pumps and controls run on mains power. In frost, homes can then cool down quickly.
- **One room instead of the whole home:** everyone stays in one room that is easy to keep warm. Doors closed, shutters and curtains closed at night – and still air the room briefly and regularly.
- **Clothing, blankets and sleeping bags** replace the heating for a while. Several thin layers keep you warmer than one thick one. Get dressed before you start to feel cold.
- **The biggest danger is carbon monoxide (CO):** barbecues, cartridge camping stoves, patio heaters, generators and gas ovens never belong in your home for heating. CO has no smell – a tested CO alarm warns you.
- **Look out for others:** older people, babies and small children, people who are ill and people in need of care get cold more easily. During long outages, many local councils open **warming rooms** or emergency shelters.

START SMALL

You don't need any new equipment for this. Pick one of these small tasks each day – none takes longer than ten minutes:

- **Understand your heating.** Check what heats your home: gas boiler, oil boiler, district heating, heat pump, stove? Almost all of them need electricity. Note down under Home where the heating and the main stop tap are.
- **Choose a warm room.** Walk through your home: which room is more on the inside, has few outside walls and a door that closes well? That is your warm room.
- **Count blankets and sleeping bags.** Is there enough for everyone in the household? Whatever is missing goes on the shopping list or into your supplies.
- **Warm things in one place.** Hat, scarf, gloves, thick socks, wool cardigan – gather them so you can find them in the dark.
- **Look for draughts.** On a cold day, hold your hand near windows and doors. Where is there a draught? A draught excluder for the door is quickly made.
- **Check your CO alarm.** Do you have one? Then press the test button. If not: put a tested alarm on your shopping list.
- **Know your neighbours.** Who in your building lives alone, is older or ill? A short chat today makes it easier to knock in an emergency – more in the Neighbourhood guide.

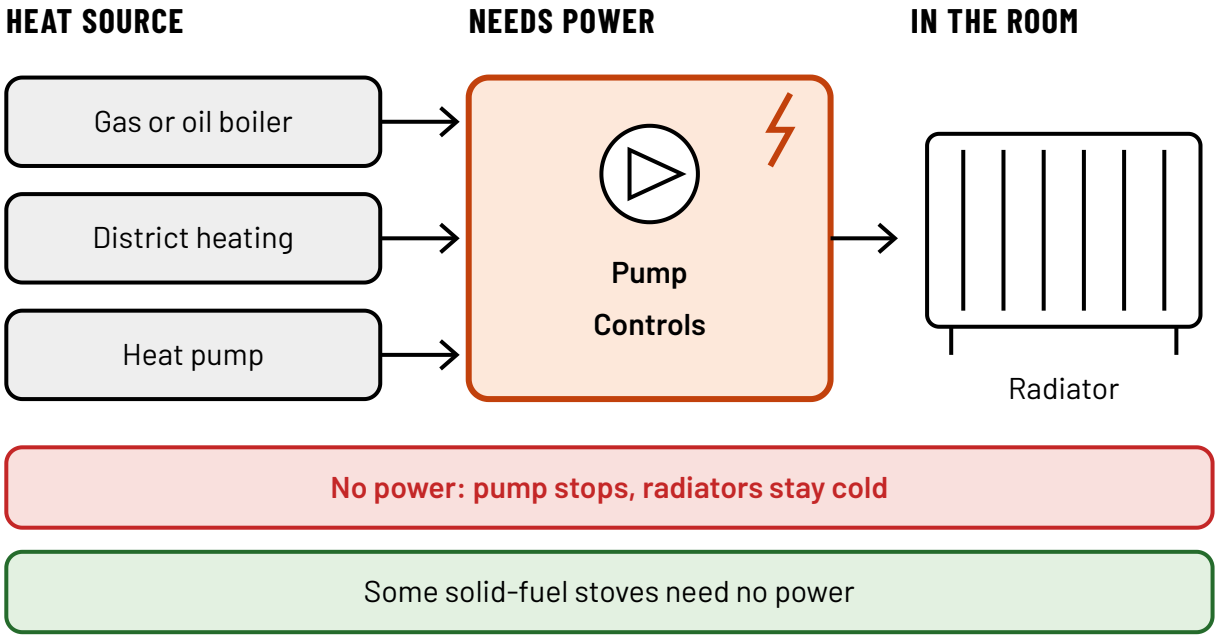
UNDERSTANDING

Why the heating fails without electricity

In most heating systems the heat does not come straight from the socket – and yet without electricity it stays cold. The reason is the small helpers: the **circulation pump** pushes the hot water through the radiators, and the **controls** make sure the burner runs and the temperature is right. If they stop, the heat stays in the boiler or never arrives.

- **Gas and oil heating:** many fail because the controls, circulation pumps and regulation need electricity.
- **District heating:** the heating plant may keep running – but if the pumps in the district heating network have no power, no heat reaches you. That is what happened in January 2026 in Berlin-Steglitz-Zehlendorf: around 12,000 homes had no district heating, and all electrically controlled flat and block heating systems failed as well.
- **Heat pumps and electric heating** do not run at all without electricity.
- **Some wood, coal or log-burning stoves** work without mains power.

It can also happen the other way round: the heating can fail while the power is still on – for example because of a fuel shortage or a technical fault. Electric fan heaters are tempting then. But the Greifswald fire service points out that many fan heaters at once can overload the power grid.



Why heating needs electricity: a boiler, district heating or heat pump supplies heat, but the pump and controls need electricity – without them the radiators stay cold

How quickly it gets cold

There is no fixed figure. How fast a home cools down depends on the outside temperature, the insulation and the heating system. The BBK (Germany's Federal Office of Civil Protection) writes that rooms can **cool down quickly** in winter; the Greifswald fire service expects noticeable restrictions within just a few hours of a heating failure. In Berlin in January 2026, the continuous frost made homes cool down quickly. In frost there is another problem: water pipes can freeze and burst.

As a guide: the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) advises heating rooms you spend a lot of time in to **at least 18 °C** where possible. Without heating you often can't manage that – which makes clothing, blankets and the warm room all the more important. A simple thermometer shows you how warm it really is.

Who needs to take extra care

Cold does not affect everyone equally. Health agencies name in particular:

- people aged 65 and over, especially if they live alone, have low mobility or rarely leave the house,
- babies and children under five,
- people with long-term health conditions or disabilities, pregnant women,
- people who drink alcohol or use drugs.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explicitly names older adults with inadequate food, clothing or heating and babies sleeping in cold bedrooms. The Berlin report after the 2026 power cut also describes how older people tend to refuse help and stay in their homes even when

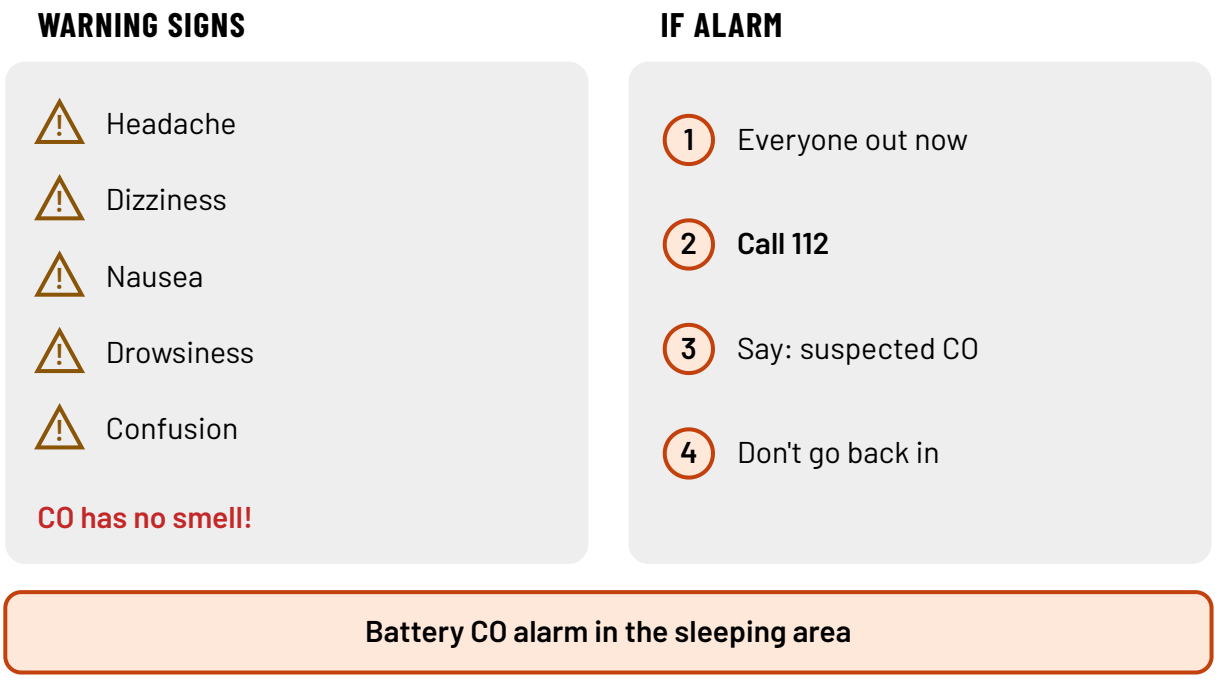
it gets uncomfortable – often out of fear of burglaries. That is why keeping an eye on your neighbours matters so much.

Carbon monoxide – the invisible danger

When something burns – wood, coal, gas, charcoal, petrol – and there is not enough oxygen, **carbon monoxide (CO)** is produced. The gas has no colour, smell or taste. In the body it blocks the transport of oxygen in the blood – a kind of "suffocation from the inside", but without feeling short of breath.

The first signs are easy to mistake, for example for flu: **headache, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, weakness, drowsiness, confusion**, and chest pain. At high concentrations a few breaths are enough to cause unconsciousness. According to the CDC, people who are asleep or have been drinking can die before they notice anything. Babies, older people and people with heart or breathing conditions become seriously ill more quickly.

Fire services in North Rhine-Westphalia report CO call-outs caused by faulty gas boilers, wrongly operated wood stoves and "indoor barbecuing". Particularly treacherous: a barbecue on an enclosed balcony or right in front of a window can also cause poisoning without anyone noticing. A burning or even just smouldering charcoal barbecue inside the home is an acute danger to life.



Carbon monoxide: warning signs are headache, dizziness, nausea, drowsiness and confusion, and CO has no smell; if the alarm goes off, everyone out at once, call 112, say you suspect CO, do not go back in; a battery CO alarm belongs in the sleeping area

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025, pp. 5, 22–23), BBK "Stromausfall – Vorsorge und Selbsthilfe" (2026), Spandau district office "Stromausfall", Steglitz-Zehlendorf district office, after-action report (6/2026), Greifswald fire service (10/2025), UKHSA (4/2026), NHS "Keep warm, keep well", CDC "Carbon Monoxide Poisoning" (10/2026) and "Preventing Hypothermia" (8/2026), VdF NRW/AGBF NRW, CO recommendation (2012).

PREPARING

The BBK puts it simply: with warm clothing, blankets and sleeping bags you can bridge a heating failure for a while. You already have most of that. The supplies calculator shows whether there are enough blankets and sleeping bags for everyone in your household; lamps and stoves are under Equipment.

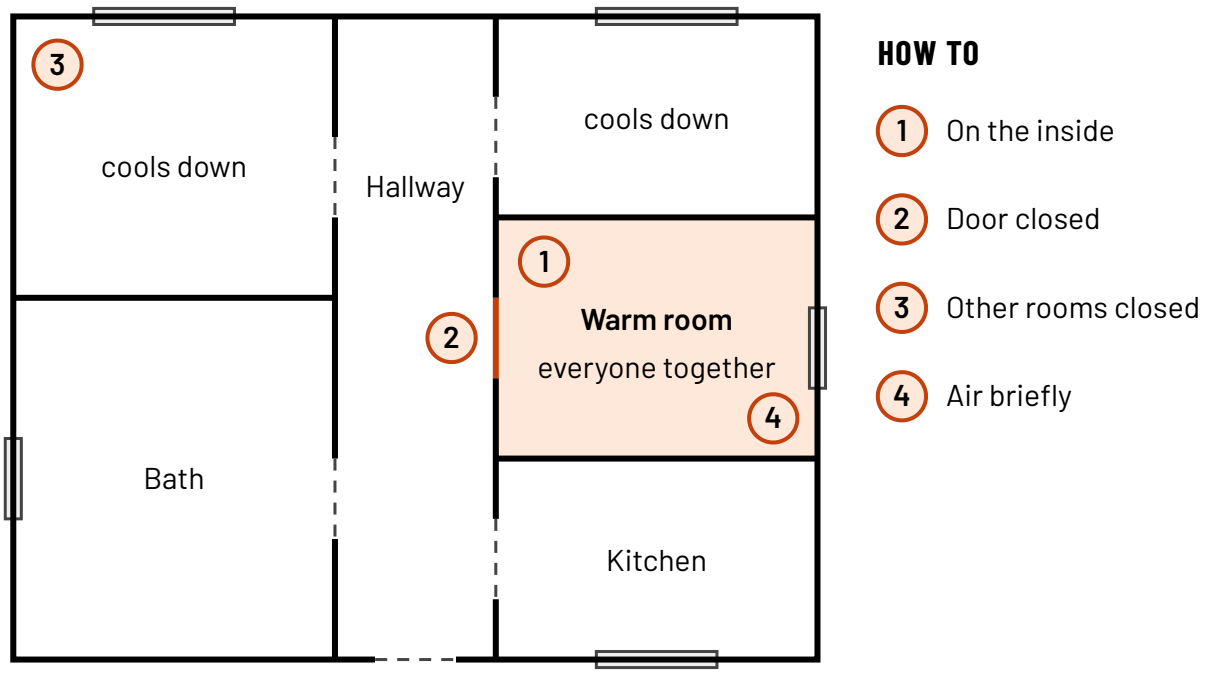
Choosing the warm room

Keeping the whole home warm hardly works without heating. A single room is more realistic. Authorities recommend choosing **one room to stay in** that is easy to keep warm, and keeping its **doors closed**. The CDC advises closing off unused rooms on the outside walls and gathering together in a single interior room.

A good warm room is therefore:

- **on the inside of the home,** with few outside walls and few or small windows,
- **with a door that closes well,** so the warmth doesn't escape into the hallway,
- **big enough** for everyone to sit and sleep there,
- **easy to air,** because even the warm room needs fresh air regularly,
- if you have a stove or fireplace: the room it is in.

The other rooms stay closed. Only go into the kitchen and bathroom briefly.

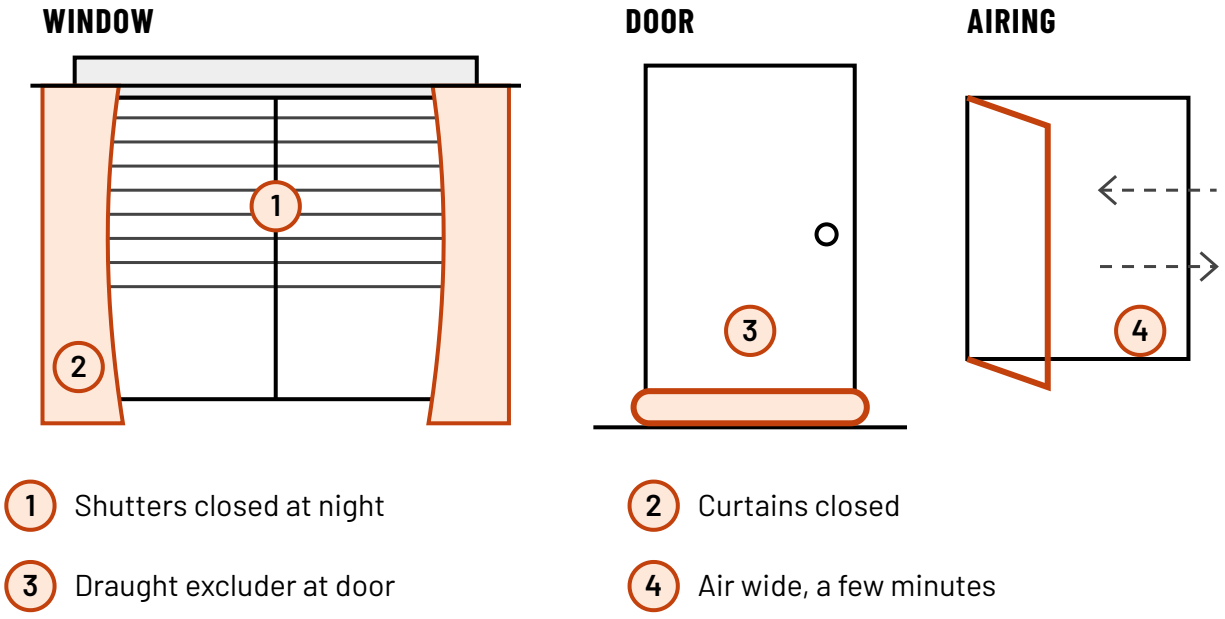


Floor plan with a warm room: an interior room with few outside walls becomes the warm room, all doors stay closed, the other rooms cool down

Sealing windows and doors

A lot of heat is lost through windows and leaky doors. A few simple things help:

1. **Close the shutters at night.** The consumer advice centre of Rhineland-Palatinate advises closing roller shutters at night when it is cold in winter – this can greatly reduce heat loss through the window.
2. **Draw the curtains.** Closed curtains add to the effect. The bigger and poorer the windows, the more it helps.
3. **Stop draughts at the door.** A draught excluder at the bottom of the door is simple and cheap. If need be, a rolled-up towel will do.
4. **Air the room anyway.** The BBK recommends regular short, intensive airing: open the window wide for a few minutes, then close it again. This improves the air and is especially important when candles are burning or a stove is running.



Keeping the heat in the room: shutters closed at night, curtains closed, a draught excluder at the door, and still open the window wide for a few minutes regularly

Clothing: the layering principle

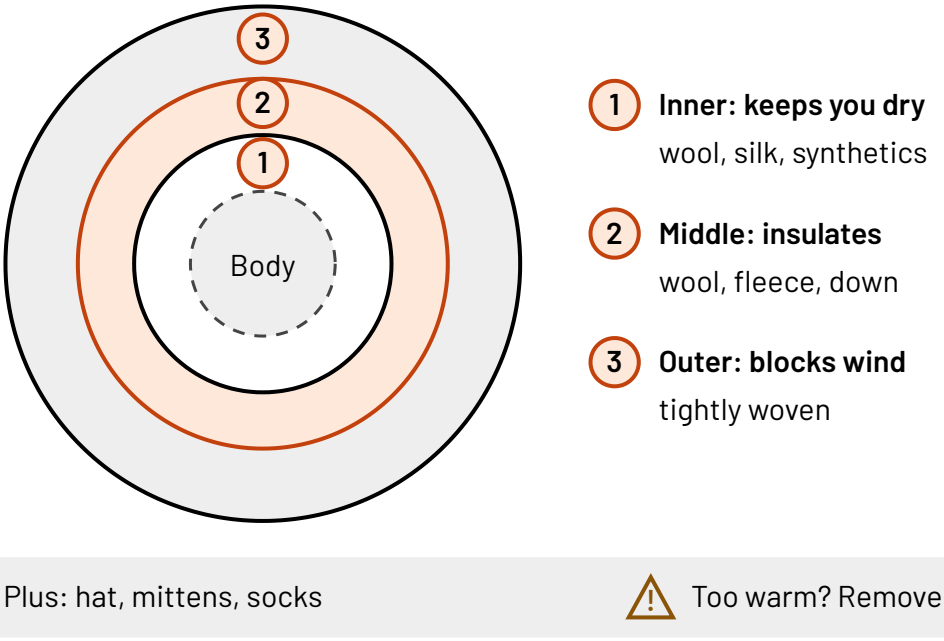
Several thinner layers keep you warmer than one thick one – warm air stays trapped between the layers, and you can take one layer off before you start to sweat. The CDC describes three layers:

1. **Inner layer:** fabrics that hold body heat and don't soak up moisture – wool, silk or synthetic fibres are better than cotton.
2. **Middle layer:** an insulating layer that traps air close to the body – for example wool, fleece or down.
3. **Outer layer:** tightly woven, ideally wind- and water-resistant.

Add a **hat, thick socks and sturdy slippers**. Mittens are warmer than gloves. And two rules that many people forget:

- **Stay dry.** Wet clothing chills the body quickly – change out of wet things straight away.
- **Don't start sweating.** If you get warm, take off a layer. Sweat cools you down.

Put together a "cold kit" for each person: long underwear, a wool jumper, hat, scarf, socks, gloves. A few warming pads for hands and feet, as the city of Dresden suggests for emergencies, go well with it.



The layering principle: an inner layer that keeps you dry, a middle layer that insulates, a tight outer layer against wind; plus hat, mittens and socks

Sleeping without freezing

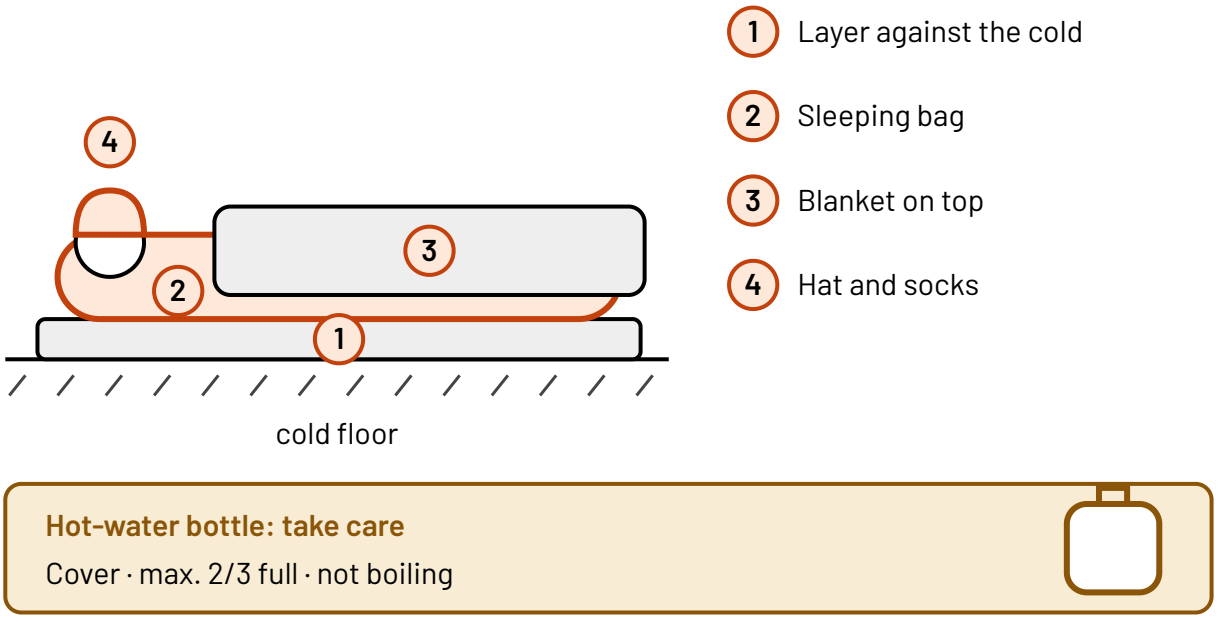
Night is the coldest time, and you don't move while you sleep. So prepare your sleeping place well:

- **Insulate from below.** Cold ground draws away a lot of heat – for hypothermia, the German Red Cross (DRK) advises putting a blanket underneath. Put a sleeping mat, a blanket or a second mattress under your sleeping bag, especially if you sleep on the floor.
- **Sleeping bag plus blanket.** The BBK names sleeping bags explicitly. A blanket on top keeps you even warmer.
- **Hat and socks** at night too – for adults and older children, not for babies (see below).
- **Windows closed at night.** Health agencies advise keeping bedroom windows closed at night. Air the room during the day and before going to bed.
- **No candles while sleeping.** Candles must never burn unattended – so put them out first.
- **No device with a flame in the bedroom** unless it is explicitly approved for indoor use.

Hot-water bottle – but with care. A hot-water bottle is pleasant, but it can cause serious scalds. A British health service (NHS Wales) advises:

1. Let boiled water cool for a few minutes, **don't fill it with boiling water**.
2. Fill it **no more than two thirds**, always use it **with a cover**.
3. Don't sit or lie on it.
4. Don't leave it against the same part of the body for more than 20 minutes.
5. Replace hot-water bottles about every two years.

If you have little feeling in your hands or feet, be extra careful. In hypothermia, a hot-water bottle does not belong on the body (see below).



Sleeping warm: a layer underneath against the cold floor, sleeping bag and blanket on top, hat and socks; hot-water bottle only with a cover, two thirds full and not with boiling water

Food and drink

Food is energy, and your body uses more of it in the cold. The CDC advises **regular, well-balanced meals** and **warm, sweet drinks or broth**. Avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks – they make your body lose heat faster.

For hot food without electricity: a gas hob often keeps working. Indoors you can also use a food warmer with a tea light or a fondue set with fuel paste; a gas stove only if it is approved for indoor use. Cartridge camping stoves and barbecues outdoors only. A vacuum flask keeps tea or broth warm, so you have to cook less often. More about cooking without electricity: the Power cut guide and the Food supplies guide.

Safe heat sources

This is where a heating failure stays merely uncomfortable – or becomes dangerous.

Safe

- **Clothing, blankets, sleeping bags, hot-water bottles and warming pads** – the foundation, with no risk from fumes.
- **A stove or fireplace,** if it has been properly installed and maintained. The BBK advises keeping a supply of wood, briquettes or coal. More under "House" below.
- **Heaters approved for indoor use** that run without electricity: the BBK names gas heaters, ethanol fireplaces and paraffin (kerosene) heaters. With gas-powered devices, make sure they have an **oxygen depletion and ignition safety device**. Only use them according to the manufacturer's instructions and make sure there is ventilation.

With care

- **Candles:** never unattended, on a fireproof base, away from anything flammable, and air rooms with candles regularly. Torches and head torches are better for light – candles can cause fires.
- **Electric heaters,** when there is power: keep them away from curtains, furniture and bedding (the CDC says about three feet, roughly one metre), choose models with automatic shut-off, no extension leads, don't leave children alone with them. And remember the strain on the grid when many people heat at once.

Never for heating in your home, cellar or garage

- charcoal and gas barbecues,
- cartridge camping stoves,
- patio heaters and outdoor radiant heaters,
- generators,
- the gas oven or the hob,
- a running car in an attached garage – not even with the door open.

SAFE	WITH CARE	NEVER INDOORS
✓ Clothes, blankets	⚠ Candles	✗ Barbecue
✓ Sleeping bag	⚠ Fan heater	✗ Cartridge stove
✓ Serviced stove	⚠ Hot-water bottle	✗ Patio heater
✓ Approved heater		✗ Generator
		✗ Oven

Approved = for indoors, with safety device

Heat sources compared: safe are clothing, blankets, a sleeping bag, a serviced stove and indoor-approved heaters with a safety device; with care candles, fan heaters and hot-water bottles; never indoors barbecue, cartridge stove, patio heater, generator and oven

A carbon monoxide alarm

The BBK recommends installing **tested and approved CO alarms**. They go off when the CO concentration becomes critical. The fire services in North Rhine-Westphalia have summed up what matters:

- **Tested to EN 50291**, with a visual and audible alarm, a low-battery warning and an end-of-life indicator. An alarm with a **battery** also works during a power cut.
- **Where?** If you only have one: in the sleeping area or the hallway outside it. Not in the kitchen, bathroom or very dusty rooms.
- **How long?** Depending on the device, the sensors last several years. Replace the alarm as the manufacturer says.
- **No substitute:** a CO alarm does not replace a smoke alarm or servicing the heating.

You can record smoke alarms and CO alarms with their location under Home; if you don't have a CO alarm yet, put one straight on the shopping list.

Fire safety

When gas, candles and open flames are used for heat and light during a power cut, the risk of fire rises. The BBK therefore recommends smoke alarms in every living space and extinguishing equipment such as a fire extinguisher, fire blanket or garden hose. More in the Fire guide.

Variations for your household

Flat in an apartment building: you usually can't simply fit a stove, and a generator is not an option in a flat. Clothing, blankets and the warm room are all the more important. The balcony is not a safe place for a barbecue to warm up either: a barbecue on a fully or partly enclosed balcony or in front of a window can bring CO into the flat. Gas cartridges do not belong in the cellar. With district or central heating it can take a while after the power returns before the heat is back – then your landlord or building management is the one to contact.

House: if you have a fireplace or stove, keep a supply of fuel and have the stove and chimney checked regularly – blocked or damaged chimneys, poor draught and self-installed stoves are typical causes of CO. Check whether an alternative heat source is possible and get expert advice on it. Pipes in unheated rooms and outdoor areas are particularly at risk in frost (see "Water pipes" below). And: never let the car run in an attached garage.

With babies and small children: small children get cold more easily. For safe baby sleep, the same applies in a crisis: the baby sleeps **on its back in a baby sleeping bag**, in its own cot, **without blankets, pillows or sheepskins** – they can cover the baby and make it overheat. Babies regulate their temperature through their uncovered head, so no hat while sleeping. You can dress your baby warmly, but don't let it overheat. Ideally, talk to your midwife or paediatrician beforehand about how to dress your baby if the home gets cold. According to the CDC, babies with hypothermia often have **bright red, cold skin and very low energy**. Baby food that can be prepared without electricity belongs in your supplies. More in the Children guide.

Older people: they are at greater risk from the cold. A thermometer in the warm room helps (the CDC advises older people to check the temperature often), as do warm drinks within reach and a firm arrangement about who drops by regularly. Collect medicines in good time before cold weather or storms are forecast.

With care needs: make arrangements so that you can look after relatives who need care yourself for a while if necessary. Ask the care service how it works during a long outage, and clarify what happens to devices that need electricity. The Berlin report shows that large emergency shelters are poorly suited for people who are ill or need care. So think in advance about whether you could stay with relatives or friends who are not affected. More in the Care & pets guide and the Power cut guide.

With pets: take dogs and cats with you into the warm room. Short-haired, small, old or sick dogs get cold more easily. Rabbits and guinea pigs that live outside need a frost-free shelter, and their drinking water must not freeze. Mice, rats and hamsters belong indoors all year round anyway. Carbon monoxide is dangerous for animals too. Don't forget a supply of food – more in the Care & pets guide.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025, pp. 22–23, 34–35), BBK "Stromausfall – Vorsorge und Selbsthilfe" (2026), BBK web page "Stromausfall", CDC "Winter Storm" (8/2026) and press release (1/2010), Verbraucherzentrale Rhineland-Palatinate (10/2023), Federation of German Consumer Organisations (1/2026), UKHSA (4/2026), NHS "Keep warm, keep well", NHS Wales (hot-water bottles), DRK "Erfrierungen und Unterkühlungen", VdF NRW/AGBF NRW (2012), City of Dresden (11/2024),

Spandau district office, Berlin Senate "Sicherer Babyschlaf" (8/2024), German Animal Welfare Federation (1/2024), Steglitz-Zehlendorf district office (6/2026), State of Schleswig-Holstein (3/2026).

IN AN EMERGENCY

When the heating fails

1. **Find the cause.** Is the power off, or only the heating? Check the fuse box, ask the neighbours, switch on the battery radio. What to do in a power cut is in the Power cut guide.
2. **Switch off electric heating devices** that were running: fan heater, electric blanket, cooker, iron. Otherwise they switch back on uncontrolled when the power returns.
3. **Keep the heat in:** windows and doors closed, shutters and curtains closed at cold windows.
4. **Get dressed in good time.** Don't wait until you feel cold – put on the layers while you are still warm.
5. **Set up the warm room:** blankets, sleeping bags, a vacuum flask, a lamp, the radio and water go in. Everyone stays there, the other doors stay closed.
6. **Check on others:** children, older or ill people in your household and in the neighbourhood.

The day in the warm room

1. **Air briefly and regularly:** open the window wide for a few minutes, then close it. More often if candles are burning or a stove is running.
2. **Eat and drink warm things,** spread over the day. Tea, broth, sweetened drinks; leave out alcohol.
3. **Move:** don't sit still for more than an hour or so. If getting up is hard, even stretching your arms and legs helps.
4. **Stay dry:** change damp socks and sweaty clothes straight away.
5. **Candles only under supervision** – out when you leave the room.
6. **Switch on the radio at set times:** that's where you'll hear when the power will be back and where there are warming rooms.

If the CO alarm goes off or you suspect CO

Headache, dizziness or nausea, and something is burning or an engine is running somewhere? Then act immediately:

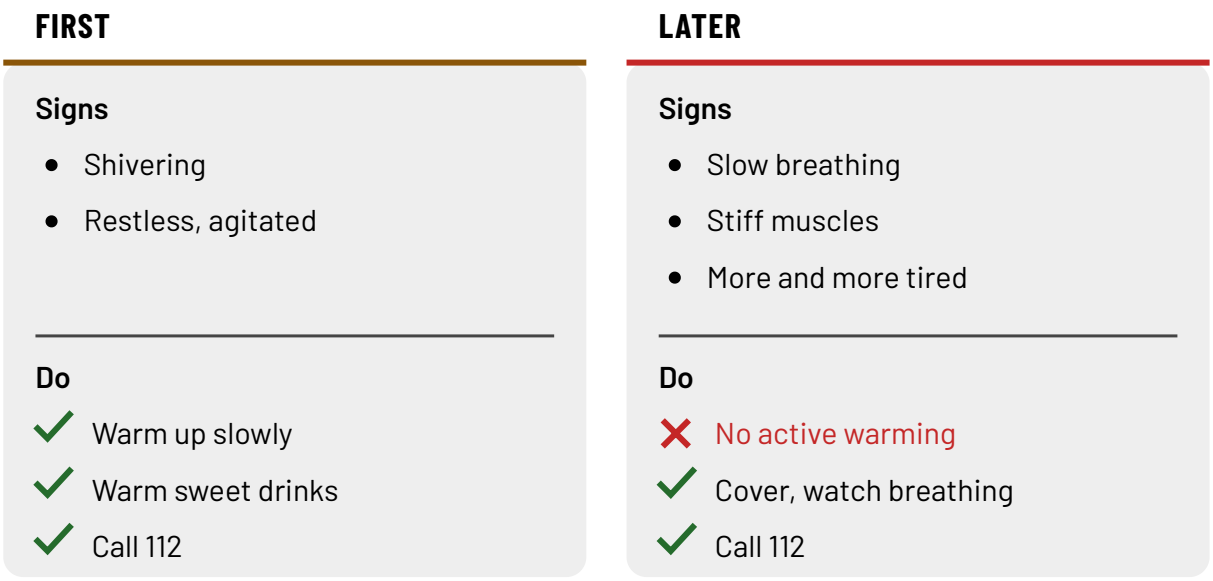
1. **Everyone straight outside into the fresh air** – children and animals too. Don't look for the cause first.
2. **Call 112** (in Germany and the EU), describe the symptoms and say that you suspect **carbon monoxide**.
3. **Don't go back in** to rescue someone or switch off the device – don't put yourself in danger.
4. **Guide the fire brigade and ambulance crew** to the scene.

Recognising hypothermia and frostbite

Hypothermia doesn't only happen outdoors, but also in a cold home – especially in older people and babies. Watch for these signs:

- **Hypothermia, early stage:** shivering, the person is agitated or restless, later calmer. In adults also: very tired, confused, fumbling hands, slurred speech, memory loss.
- **Hypothermia, late stage:** breathing slows down, the muscles become stiff, the person gets more and more tired, up to unconsciousness.
- **Babies:** bright red, cold skin, very low energy.
- **Frostbite (often fingers, toes, ears, nose):** numbness, skin first bluish-red, later white-yellow or white-grey, soft and painful at first, later hard and numb.

What you do: call 112. In the early stage, bring the person to a warm place and warm them up slowly, take off wet clothing, wrap them in warm blankets or a rescue blanket, give warm sweetened drinks only if fully conscious, no alcohol. In the late stage, **no more active warming** – no rubbing, no hot-water bottle – just cover them, put them in the recovery position if unconscious and keep checking their breathing. Don't rub or move frostbitten areas. The detailed steps are in the First aid guide. This section does not replace a first aid course.



Recognising hypothermia: first shivering and restlessness – warm up, warm sweet drinks, call 112; later slow breathing, stiff muscles, drowsiness – no more warming, cover up, call 112

Water pipes in frost

In hard frost, water pipes can freeze and burst – that is exactly what happened in Berlin in January 2026.

1. **Prevent it:** close cellar windows. Pipes in unheated rooms are particularly at risk; check them regularly.
2. **If a pipe has frozen:** shut it off immediately, if necessary close the **main stop tap**. Otherwise water will leak out when it thaws.
3. **Thaw slowly** – with hot cloths or hot-water bottles. **Never with an open flame** such as a gas torch or blowlamp – risk of fire.
4. **Afterwards,** let the water run slowly and check the pipe for leaks straight away. If it is damaged or you are unsure: call a plumber.

You can note down where your main stop tap is under Home.

Warming rooms and help points

If it gets too cold at home, you don't have to hold out alone. During long outages, many local councils set up **warming rooms** ("Wärmeinseln", "Wärmestuben"), emergency shelters or help points – in Berlin they are called "Katastrophenschutz-Leuchttürme" (civil protection lighthouses).

- **What they offer:** a heated room for a few hours, warm drinks, information, often a chance to charge your phone or make an emergency call. Emergency shelters also provide food and a place to sleep.
- **Who runs them:** in Berlin in January 2026, alongside town halls, church congregations, neighbourhood centres, youth centres and clubs also opened warming rooms; the public transport company set up heated buses at terminal stops. The emergency shelters were used mainly during the day as a place to warm up and meet people.
- **How to find them:** on the radio, from your council, on notices – and ideally in advance. Some towns publish their locations; Greifswald, for example, suggests pinning the leaflet with the warming rooms to your fuse box. Ask your council calmly.

Especially for older, ill or lone people, going to a warming room can be the better choice. Offer to go with someone. If possible, a night with relatives or friends outside the affected area is also a good solution.

Checking on your neighbours

Keep in touch with neighbours, friends and family and ask whether they feel unwell or need help – for example with shopping, medicines or a hot meal. Knock especially on the doors of people who live alone, are older or ill. Watch for signs of hypothermia. If someone refuses help at first, stay in touch anyway and drop by again later. How to organise yourselves in your building is in the Neighbourhood guide.

The most important points for the moment, in short: Emergency mode: cold.

Sources for this section: BBK guide (11/2025, pp. 13, 23), BBK "Stromausfall – Vorsorge und Selbsthilfe" (2026), VdF NRW/AGBF NRW, CO recommendation (2012), DRK "Erfrierungen und Unterkühlungen", CDC "Preventing Hypothermia" (8/2026) and "Winter Storm" (8/2026), UKHSA (4/2026),

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AFTERWARDS

1. **Check the heating.** When the power is back, first check that the heating, fridge and freezer and medical devices are working. Reset clocks and heating controls.
2. **Be patient if the heat doesn't come back.** With district heating or large residential complexes, the heat can return later than the electricity – in Berlin in 2026, circulation pumps and district heating transfer stations were damaged after the outage. Report problems to your landlord or building management, and stay in the warm room until then.
3. **Watch the pipes,** especially after frost: look out for damp patches, drips and unusual noises. Damage often only shows later.
4. **Keep looking out for others:** older people and people with disabilities may still need help after the outage.
5. **Restock:** fuel, batteries for lamps, radio and CO alarm, gas cartridges, warming pads. Enter them in your supplies or on the shopping list.
6. **Learn from it:** which room worked best? What was missing – a blanket, a sleeping mat, gloves? Who in the neighbourhood needed help? Write it down.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Heating with a barbecue, camping stove, patio heater or gas oven.** Danger to life from carbon monoxide – on an enclosed balcony too.
- **Running a generator in the home, cellar or garage.**
- **Waiting until you feel cold** instead of putting on layers in good time.
- **Trying to keep the whole home warm** instead of one room.
- **Not airing at all** to save heat.
- **Leaving candles burning while you sleep or in empty rooms.**
- **Filling a hot-water bottle with boiling water** or using it without a cover.
- **Alcohol "to warm up".** It makes the body lose heat faster.
- **Rubbing a hypothermic person hard** or warming them with a hot-water bottle in severe hypothermia.
- **Thawing frozen pipes with an open flame.**
- **Putting a baby to bed with blankets, pillows and a hat.**
- **Not checking on the neighbours** – or giving up when they say no at first.

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Warm room chosen (on the inside, door closes well)
- [ ] Warm clothing in layers for each person: long underwear, jumper, jacket
- [ ] Hat, scarf, gloves or mittens, thick socks, slippers
- [ ] Blankets and sleeping bags for everyone, plus sleeping mats or underlays
- [ ] Hot-water bottles with covers, warming pads for hands and feet
- [ ] Vacuum flask and thermometer
- [ ] Draught excluder for the door of the warm room
- [ ] Tested CO alarm (EN 50291) with battery, in the sleeping area
- [ ] Smoke alarms tested, fire extinguisher or fire blanket
- [ ] Torches or head torches instead of lots of candles
- [ ] Stove for indoors (food warmer, fondue) or for outdoors, with fuel
- [ ] With a stove or fireplace: fuel supply, stove and chimney checked
- [ ] If wanted: heater approved for indoor use with safety device, and fuel
- [ ] Main stop tap and heating noted under Home
- [ ] Baby sleeping bag, baby food that works without electricity
- [ ] Food and a warm place for pets
- [ ] Know where your council sets up warming rooms or help points
- [ ] Arrangement with neighbours: who checks on whom?

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CHAPTER 11

SEVERE WEATHER, STORMS AND THUNDERSTORMS

What the weather service's warning levels mean and how to get safely through storms, thunderstorms, hail, snow and black ice – at home, on the road and afterwards.

Last updated: 05/11/2026

DO NOW

1. Stay indoors, close windows and doors, keep away from windows
2. Secure loose objects on the balcony and in the garden – while there is still time
3. In a thunderstorm get out of the water, away from trees, masts and peaks – into a building or car
4. Don't drive in a storm; keep away from trees, scaffolding and power lines
5. After the storm don't touch power lines, avoid woods; in danger call 112

Storms, thunderstorms, hail, snow and black ice are part of the weather in Germany. Most of the time things turn out fine – especially if you do two things: take the warning seriously and stay indoors while the bad weather lasts. The Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK) puts it simply: the most important rule is to stay at home. This guide explains what the warning levels of the German Weather Service mean, how to prepare your home, balcony and garden, and what to do if a thunderstorm catches you outdoors. Heavy rain and flooding are covered in the guide Floods and heavy rain.

AT A GLANCE

- **Know the warning levels:** The German Weather Service (Deutscher Wetterdienst, DWD) warns in four levels: yellow (weather warning), orange (significant weather), red (severe weather) and violet (extreme severe weather). From red, the DWD advises avoiding being outdoors.
- **In a storm, stay indoors,** away from windows, and secure loose things beforehand. A car is not a safe place in a storm. From wind force 10 or a hurricane warning, the ADAC (German automobile club) advises not driving at all.
- **In a thunderstorm:** If you can hear thunder, you are within range. Get into a building or a car with a metal body, out of the water, away from isolated trees, peaks and masts. The storm is only over 30 minutes after the last thunder.
- **Outdoors without shelter:** crouch down, feet close together, ideally in a hollow, with distance to other people – don't lie down.

- **In winter:** When there are warnings of black ice or heavy snowfall, stay at home if you can, keep clear of roof edges and don't clear roofs yourself.
- **Afterwards:** never touch power lines that have come down or are hanging, avoid woods, and photograph the damage before you clear up.

START SMALL

You hardly need any equipment for severe weather. Pick one of these each day – none takes more than ten minutes:

- **Set up warnings:** Under Warnings, choose the districts where you live and work – the DWD's official weather warnings appear there too. The DWD also has its own free app, WarnWetter (see Recommended apps).
- **Balcony and garden walk-round:** What could blow away in a storm? Plant pots, furniture, trampoline, wheelie bins, bikes. Think about where you will put everything or how you will tie it down.
- **Check light and radio:** Do you have a radio with batteries or a crank and a torch with fresh batteries ready?
- **Where's what:** Enter the fuse box and the fault number of your grid operator (it's on your electricity bill) under Where's what.
- **Photograph your home:** Walk once through your flat, cellar and garden and photograph everything. The BBK advises documenting your property with photos and keeping the files safe. A copy goes in your document folder.
- **Read your policy:** Are storm, hail and lightning included in your contents and buildings insurance? Is there a clause for power-surge damage?
- **Practise the thunderstorm rules:** Count the seconds between lightning and thunder with your family and show the crouch position once. You set a meeting point in the family plan.

UNDERSTANDING

The weather service's warning levels

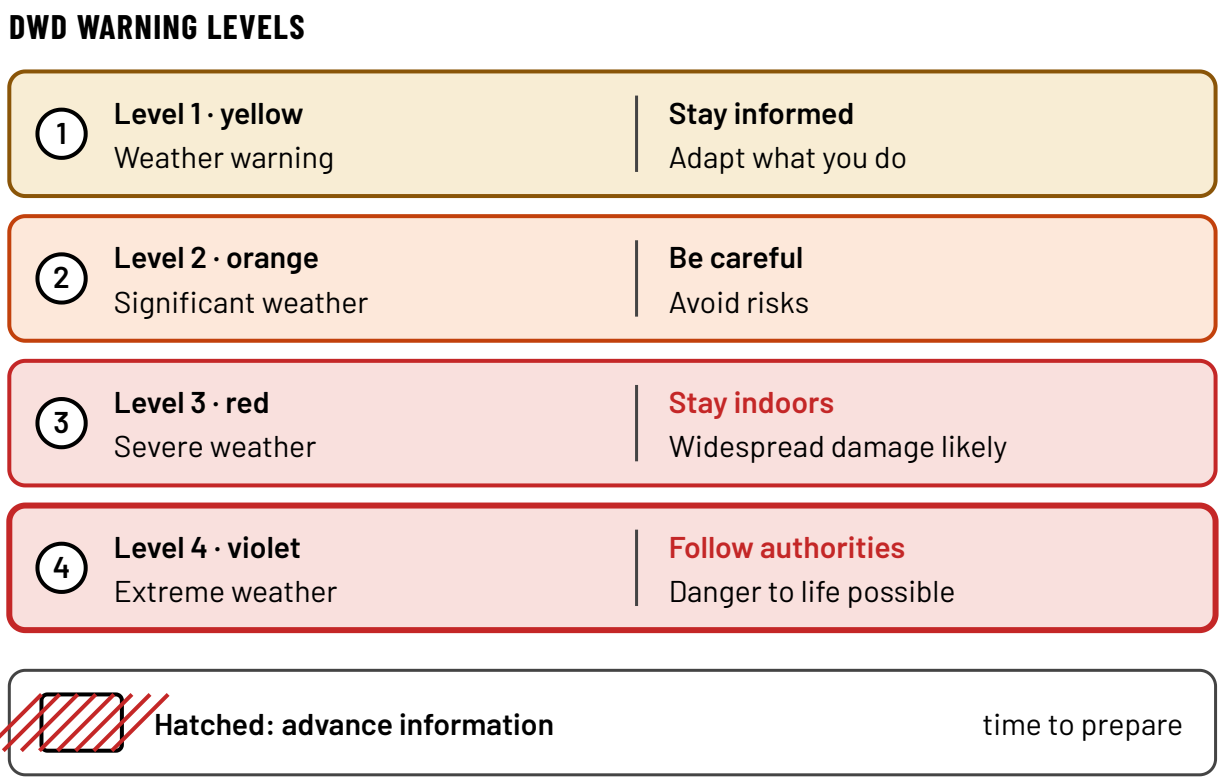
The DWD issues warnings down to district and municipality level. The colours are the same on its website and in the WarnWetter app:

LEVEL	COLOUR	WARNING	WHAT THE DWD ADVISES
1	yellow	Official warning	The weather is not unusual but can bring hazards. If you are outdoors: keep informed, adapt what you do.

LEVEL	COLOUR	WARNING	WHAT THE DWD ADVISES
2	orange	Warning of significant weather	Not unusual, but dangerous; isolated damage possible. Be careful, avoid risky behaviour.
3	red	Severe weather warning	Very dangerous, widespread damage possible. Avoid being outdoors.
4	violet	Warning of extreme severe weather	Extremely dangerous; life-threatening situations and major destruction possible, often over large areas. Stay out of it, follow the authorities' instructions, prepare for extraordinary measures.

A **hatched area** on the warning map is **advance information about severe weather** (Vorabinformation Unwetter): very dangerous or even extreme weather is possible, but the area, time and strength are not yet certain. It gives you time to prepare. Not every type of weather has all four levels – for fog, for example, there is only level 1. And the DWD stresses that its recommendations are non-binding: you adapt them to the situation where you are.

How you get warnings, even without power or a network, is explained in the guide Warnings and communication.



The four warning levels of the German Weather Service: level 1 yellow, weather warning, stay informed. Level 2 orange, significant weather, be careful. Level 3 red, severe weather, stay indoors. Level 4 violet, extreme severe weather, follow the authorities. Hatched means advance information: time to prepare.

Storms and hurricane-force winds

The DWD warns according to the strength of the **gusts**, measured about 10 m above open ground. The scale is based on the Beaufort scale (Bft):

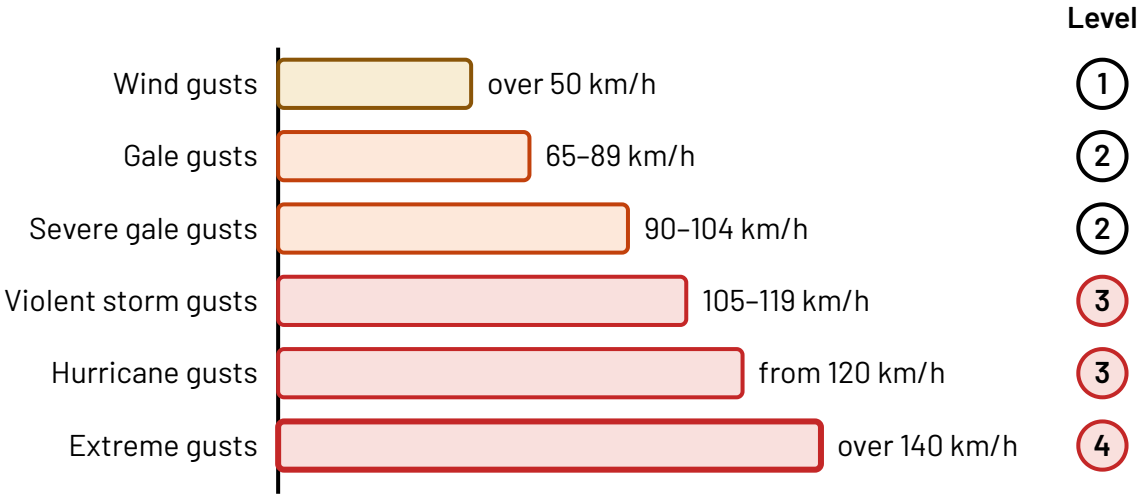
WARNING	GUSTS	BEAUFORT	LEVEL
Wind gusts (Windböen)	over 50 km/h	7	1
Gale-force gusts (Sturmböen)	65 to 89 km/h	8 to 9	2
Severe gale-force gusts (schwere Sturmböen)	90 to 104 km/h	10	2
Violent storm gusts (orkanartige Böen)	105 to 119 km/h	11	3
Hurricane-force gusts (Orkanböen)	from 120 km/h	12	3
Extreme hurricane-force gusts (extreme Orkanböen)	widely over 140 km/h	–	4

For each warning, the DWD describes what can happen: with **gale-force gusts**, individual branches break off and objects fly around. With **severe gale-force gusts**, some trees fall. From **violent storm**

gusts, there is danger to life and limb from falling trees, power lines and scaffolding and from falling branches and roof tiles. With **hurricane-force gusts**, trees fall in many places and buildings are damaged. With **extreme hurricane-force gusts**, roofs are torn off, even large objects fly around, and you should be ready for power and mobile network failures.

For insurance purposes, by the way, wind only counts as a storm from **wind force 8 (about 62 km/h)** (Verbraucherzentrale, the German consumer advice centres) – more on this under "Afterwards".

GUSTS AND WARNING LEVELS



Gusts, measured about 10 m above open ground

DWD wind warnings as bars: wind gusts from 50 kilometres per hour, gale-force gusts from 65, severe gale-force gusts from 90, violent storm gusts from 105, hurricane-force gusts from 120, extreme gusts over 140. The colours show warning levels 1 to 4.

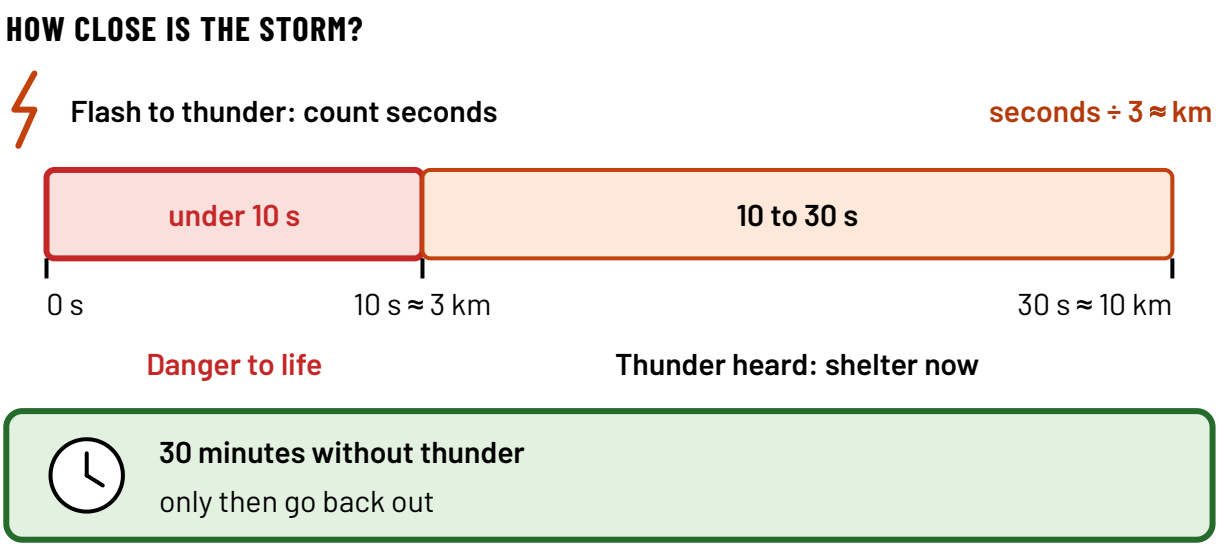
Thunderstorms and lightning

Thunderstorms mainly develop on humid, warm days and often come with heatwaves (BBK; see guide Heat). Lightning prefers to strike the highest point around. People and animals can be struck directly or indirectly – through the ground around the point of impact or through conducting metal parts (BBK). A lightning strike can be fatal. The German folk saying that you should avoid oaks but seek out beeches is wrong: lightning strikes all kinds of tree equally (VDE, BBK).

How far away is the storm? Count the seconds between lightning and thunder and divide by three – that gives you roughly the distance in kilometres. So 9 seconds means about 3 km (DWD). From this, the VDE Committee for Lightning Protection and Research (VDE|ABB) derives three simple rules:

1. **You can hear thunder:** the storm is less than about 10 km away. Leave exposed places such as open fields or isolated trees immediately.
2. **10 seconds or less** between lightning and thunder: a strike near you is possible – danger to life.
3. **No thunder for 30 minutes:** only then is the storm over. That applies even if the cloud seems to be moving away.

The DWD adds: lightning "out of a clear sky" really does exist – usually from storms 10 to 20 km away. Distant thunder, on the other hand, often can't be heard at all. So blue sky above you does not yet mean the danger is over (DWD, CDC).



Lightning and thunder: count the seconds and divide by three to get kilometres. Thunder audible means under 10 kilometres, take shelter. 10 seconds or less means danger to life. Only go back out 30 minutes after the last thunder.

The DWD warns of thunderstorms in four levels: a simple **thunderstorm** (1), a **strong thunderstorm** with gale-force gusts, heavy rain or hail (2), a **severe thunderstorm** with hail, very heavy rain or hurricane-force gusts, possibly with a risk of tornadoes (3), and an **extreme thunderstorm** (4).

Hail

Hail comes from large thunderclouds. In Germany, hailstones are usually 0.5 to 3 cm across and weigh up to about 20 g; much bigger ones are extremely rare here. Hail can occur in any season, but is most common between May and August. It mainly damages windows, glass roofs, roof tiles, facades and roller shutters – and can block drains and gutters so that water backs up (BBK).

Tornadoes

Tornadoes do happen in Germany too, but they are usually small and short-lived. From 2000 to 2025 there were on average **49 a year** according to the DWD, around 29 to 69 depending on the year. Strong tornadoes (IF2 and above, from about 220 km/h) number only around 1 to 9 a year. The main season runs from late May to September.

Tornadoes can't be predicted precisely. The DWD can point out an increased risk in a region at most about 18 hours in advance. If funnel-shaped, rotating cloud tubes are spotted, there is a tornado risk for the next 15 to 60 minutes; the DWD then issues a severe weather warning with a note about the tornado risk (DWD).

Snow, ice and slippery roads

Glätte (slippery conditions) is the umbrella term for ice on the ground and on objects. Among other things, the DWD distinguishes **black ice from freezing rain** (Glatteis) – supercooled rain or drizzle freezes instantly on impact – and **ice from refreezing water** (Eisglätte), where meltwater or puddles freeze. The latter is particularly treacherous because no precipitation needs to fall beforehand. The warnings range from isolated slippery patches (level 1) to **extreme black ice** with heavy ice build-up and widespread ice breakage (level 4). Even with **significant slippery conditions** (level 2), ice deposits can break branches and bring down trees.

For **snowfall**, the DWD warns according to amount and altitude. In lowlands up to 800 m, "heavy snowfall" (level 3) means, for example, 10 to 20 cm in 6 hours or 15 to 25 cm in 12 hours.

For the roof, what counts is not the depth of the snow but its **weight**. Layers of ice in the snow are hard to see: **1 cm of ice weighs about as much as 10 cm of powder snow** (BBK). On top of that come snow sliding off roofs and icicles above pavements.

Why severe weather often cuts the power

Falling trees can damage power lines (BBK). A storm can also disrupt the mobile network or internet access (BBK guide). For extreme severe weather, the DWD explicitly advises preparing for network failures. What you need then is in the guide Power cut.

Sources for this section: DWD warning levels and colour scale, DWD warning criteria, DWD hazard notes and recommendations for each warning event, DWD "Die Entfernung von Gewittern" (6/2020), DWD tornado brochure (4/2022), DWD tornado season review 2026 (10/2026), DWD glossary, BBK "Naturgefahr Gewitter", "Naturgefahr Hagel", "Schneelast", BBK "Vorsorgen für Sturm, Gewitter und Hagel", BBK guide (11/2025), Max und Flocke "Blitzgescheit" (2017), VDE|ABB (2018, 2019), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026), CDC (6/2026).

PREPARING

Warnings and information

1. Under Warnings, choose the districts where you live, work and go to school. Weather warnings also come through the NINA warning app and the DWD's WarnWetter app (see Recommended apps).
2. Keep your phone able to receive alerts at night too (BBK guide).
3. Keep a radio with batteries or a crank ready – it still works when power and the mobile network fail (BBK).

According to the BBK, it's best to do anything that needs lead time while there is **no** severe weather warning yet – at the latest when advance information is issued.

Basic preparedness

For severe weather, the BBK mainly lists these points:

- **Supplies:** Build up a supply of food and drink bit by bit. When there is a severe weather warning, you should avoid leaving home if possible, even to go shopping. See the guides Drinking water and Building up food supplies.
- **Medicine cabinet:** So you don't have to go to the pharmacy during a warning. See guide First aid.
- **Power cut:** Keep a battery radio and torches ready, power banks charged. More in the guide Power cut.
- **Prepare your emergency bag and document folder,** with backup copies (see Packing an emergency bag and Document folder).
- **Document your property:** photos of your home and valuables, saved digitally and in your emergency bag.

House, roof and trees

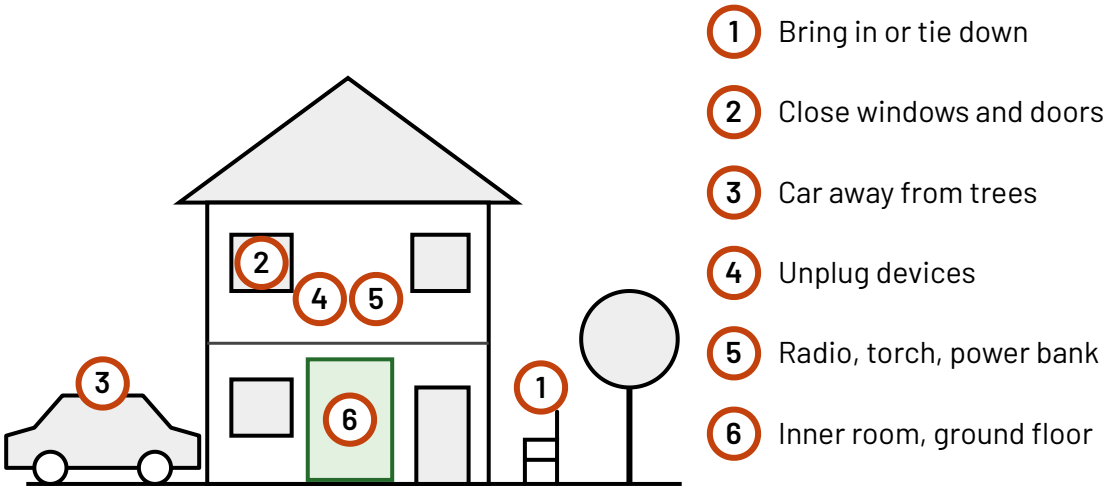
- **Renting:** Building work is a matter for your landlord or property management – ask them (BBK).
- **Roof and lightning protection:** Have the roof and the lightning protection system checked regularly by professionals. Check the masonry for cracks (BBK).
- **Keep gutters and drains** clear of leaves so water from hail and thunderstorm rain can drain away instead of backing up (BBK).
- **Trees:** Cut back long, heavy branches over the roof (BBK). Take a look at your other trees too: if a healthy tree falls in a storm, that counts as force majeure. If a visibly rotten tree causes damage, the owner is usually liable (Verbraucherzentrale).
- **Power surges:** Lightning can cause surges in cables, even from strikes some distance away. You are always safe – even in the shower – only in buildings with a lightning protection system. Surge protection devices help but don't replace complete lightning protection (VDE|ABB). Insurers usually only pay for surge damage with a separate clause (Verbraucherzentrale).

When a storm or severe weather warning comes

1. **Change your plans:** Postpone appointments and journeys, work from home if possible. Get urgent errands done before the bad weather starts (BBK).
2. **Check supplies and batteries** (BBK).
3. **Secure things outside:** Tie down or bring in movable objects such as bikes and garden furniture (BBK). Bring in or secure bins and plant pots, turn a trampoline upside down or peg it to the ground, lock the shed (Met Office). Fasten or take down tents, tarpaulins and covers in good time (DWD).
4. **Close windows and doors,** especially on the windward side, plus large doors such as garage doors. Close shutters (Met Office). Don't forget skylights (BBK).
5. **Car:** In a garage if possible. Otherwise park away from buildings, trees, walls and fences (Met Office) – and not next to scaffolding (DWD).

6. **Unplug sensitive devices** or use surge protection (BBK).
7. **Charge your phone and power banks,** including spare batteries for medical equipment (GOV.UK).

BEFORE THE STORM ARRIVES



The house before the storm in six steps: 1. bring in or tie down loose things. 2. close windows, doors and skylights. 3. car away from trees and walls. 4. unplug sensitive devices. 5. radio, torch and power bank ready. 6. stay in an inner room on the ground floor.

Winter: snow and ice

- **Have the roof checked:** For older buildings, have the roof's load-bearing capacity checked. Fit snow guards against snow sliding off and have them maintained, cut back long branches over the roof, clean the gutters. Small extensions such as conservatories can suffer from sliding snow (BBK).
- **Supplies:** For snow and ice, the BBK recommends food and drink for at least three days; if you want more security, keep supplies for up to ten days.
- **Car:** When ice or snow is forecast, fill up the tank if possible and take blankets and warm drinks (DWD). Add warm clothing, something to eat, a torch and a charged phone with a charging cable or power bank (Met Office).
- **Warmth without power:** When ice or storms bring down the lines, the heating often fails too – see guide Keeping warm without heating.

Planning trips and outings

- **Check the weather first:** If thunderstorms are forecast, postpone outdoor activities or make sure you can reach safe shelter (CDC).
- **Plan mountain tours** so that you reach a hut with lightning protection, your car or accommodation in the valley before the storm arrives (VDE|ABB).

- **Car journeys:** When a storm warning is out, avoid tree-lined routes and allow enough fuel or battery for diversions and closures (ADAC).
- **Camping:** No pitches on hilltops, next to masts, at the edge of woods or under isolated trees. At least 3 m from neighbouring tents and caravans, no metal guy lines between tents (VDE|ABB).

Variations for your household

Flat

- Your balcony is your "garden": secure or bring in window boxes, furniture and sunshade.
- In a top-floor flat, close skylights and check during hail that they stay watertight (BBK).
- Avoid cellar storage rooms during thunderstorm rain – they can flood quickly (BBK, see Floods).

House and garden

- Lock the shed, secure the trampoline, put ladders away – they can be blown into windows (Met Office).

With children

Child-friendly rules from the BBK's "Max und Flocke" learning materials, good for practising together:

- In a thunderstorm, get out of the lake or outdoor pool and a few metres away from the water.
- Don't climb tall towers, don't fly a kite.
- Go into a building. A car protects against lightning, but not against a storm.
- In an open field, make yourself small: crouch, feet close together, arms around your legs.
- A tree is a tree – don't shelter under any of them.

In winter: don't let children play alone on frozen water, and warn them that hard, icy snow and snowball fights can cause serious injuries (BBK). If schools close because of a storm, you'll need childcare (GOV.UK). More in the guide Children in a crisis.

With care needs or a disability

- Top up medication and the medicine cabinet beforehand so nobody has to go out during the warning (BBK).
- Charge spare batteries for medical equipment (GOV.UK) and work out what happens if the power is off for longer. See the guides Power cut and People who need care, and pets.
- Agree who checks on whom. For extreme severe weather, the DWD advises informing neighbours, friends and relatives about the situation. More in the guide Helping your neighbours.

With pets

- Severe weather frightens animals a lot. Calm them and make sure they can't leave the home or stable (BBK).

- Don't leave animals outdoors in a thunderstorm or tied to a tree (CDC).

Sources for this section: BBK "Vorsorgen für Sturm, Gewitter und Hagel", "Was tun bei Sturm, Gewitter und Hagel?", "Naturgefahr Gewitter", "Naturgefahr Hagel", "Schneelast", "Vorsorge und Handeln bei Kälte und Schneefall", BBK press release (1/2025), BBK guide (11/2025), Max und Flocke "Blitzgescheit" (2017), DWD hazard notes, VDE|ABB (2019, 2021), ADAC (1/2026), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026), Met Office, GOV.UK "Storms", CDC (6/2026).

IN AN EMERGENCY

Emergency mode has the short version: Emergency – severe weather. Instructions from the authorities and emergency services always come first.

Storms and hurricane-force winds at home

1. **Stay indoors.** In a severe storm, only leave the house in an emergency – outside there is a risk of falling branches, roof tiles and flying objects (BBK).
2. **Keep windows, doors and shutters closed** and stay away from unprotected openings (BBK).
3. **Choose the safest room:** an inner room on the ground floor. Avoid cellars, because they can flood quickly in thunderstorm rain, and rooms with a large ceiling span such as halls (BBK).
4. **Don't go outside to repair anything** while the storm lasts. If you have to go out, use a door on the sheltered side and close it behind you (Met Office).
5. **Stay informed:** radio, warning app, Warnings. Be ready for power and mobile network failures (DWD).

Storms outdoors and on the road

- **Seek shelter in a solid building.** Until then, keep well away from buildings, trees, scaffolding and power lines and watch out for falling branches and roof tiles (DWD).
- **Don't shelter behind walls and fences:** if they fall, they fall towards the sheltered side (Met Office).
- **A car is not a safe place in a storm** – the wind can push it off course (Max und Flocke/BBK).
- **If you have to drive:** slow down, which makes it easier to correct for a gust; both hands on the wheel, steer against it in a controlled way. Bridges, cuttings through woods and tunnel exits are particularly dangerous, as is overtaking lorries and buses. Motorhomes, caravans, buses and lorries can even tip over. **From wind force 10 or a hurricane warning,** don't drive a car or ride a motorbike at all (ADAC).
- **Bikes and motorbikes:** Gusts can push cyclists and motorcyclists off course (GOV.UK). As a driver, give them more room than usual (Met Office).
- **At the coast:** Breaking waves can sweep people off the shore into the sea. Keep away from the waves and cliff edges, keep dogs on a lead (Met Office).

Thunderstorms indoors

1. **Close windows, doors and skylights** (BBK) and keep away from windows and doors (CDC).
2. **Unplug sensitive devices** – power, aerial, data and telephone cables from TV, computer and receiver. Surges can also come from strikes further away (VDE|ABB, BBK).
3. **If the building has no lightning protection system:** don't shower or bathe and don't touch metal pipes and cables that come into the building from outside (water, gas, electricity, district heating, aerial). Don't use a corded landline; mobiles and cordless phones are safe (VDE|ABB, BBK, CDC).
4. **Don't go into a cellar with water in it** (BBK) – see Floods.

Thunderstorms outdoors

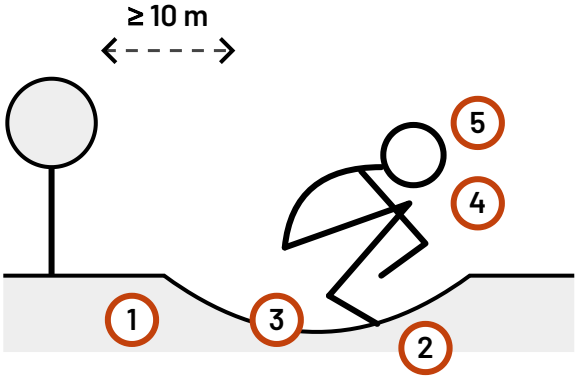
1. **Hearing thunder means acting.** Get into a building. If there isn't one, a car with a metal body (DWD, BBK).
2. **Get out of the water** – lake, outdoor pool, sea – and away from the shore (DWD, Max und Flocke/BBK).
3. **Away from high and isolated points:** open ground, mountain tops, isolated trees, groups of trees, edges of woods, towers, masts, aerials. Don't lean against fences (BBK). Ideally keep at least 10 m from trees and branches (VDE|ABB) and at least 50 m from overhead power lines (BBK).
4. **Put metal down:** leave umbrella, golf clubs and fishing rod behind, don't touch your bike (BBK, VDE|ABB, CDC).
5. **With no shelter at all:** crouch down, ideally in a hollow or dip. Feet close together, on the balls of your feet, arms around your knees, head on your knees. **Don't lie down** (BBK, VDE|ABB, Met Office).
6. **Spread out as a group:** everyone crouches alone, at least 1 m, better 3 m, from others – including your own children and your dog (VDE|ABB).
7. **In the woods:** Deep inside a dense forest of even height, the risk is lower than at the edge of the woods or under an isolated tree (VDE|ABB).
8. **Wait:** only move on 30 minutes after the last thunder (VDE|ABB, CDC).

SAFE	LAST RESORT	DANGEROUS
✓ Solid building	⚠ Crouch in a hollow	✗ Lone tree
✓ Car (metal roof)	⚠ Deep in a forest	✗ Mountain top
✓ Protected hut	⚠ Rock overhang	✗ Open field
		✗ Water and shore
		✗ Tent, wooden hut
		✗ Bike, fence, mast

Hear thunder? Take shelter at once

Safe and unsafe places in a thunderstorm. Safe: a building, a car with a metal roof and closed windows. Last resort: crouching in a hollow, deep inside a dense forest, under a rock overhang. Dangerous: isolated tree, mountain top and open field, water and shore, tent and wooden hut, bike, fence and mast.

CROUCH WHEN THERE IS NO SHELTER



1. Find a hollow or dip
2. Feet close together
3. On the balls of your feet
4. Arms around your knees
5. Head on your knees

✗ **Do not lie down**

At least 10 m from trees

1–3 m from other people

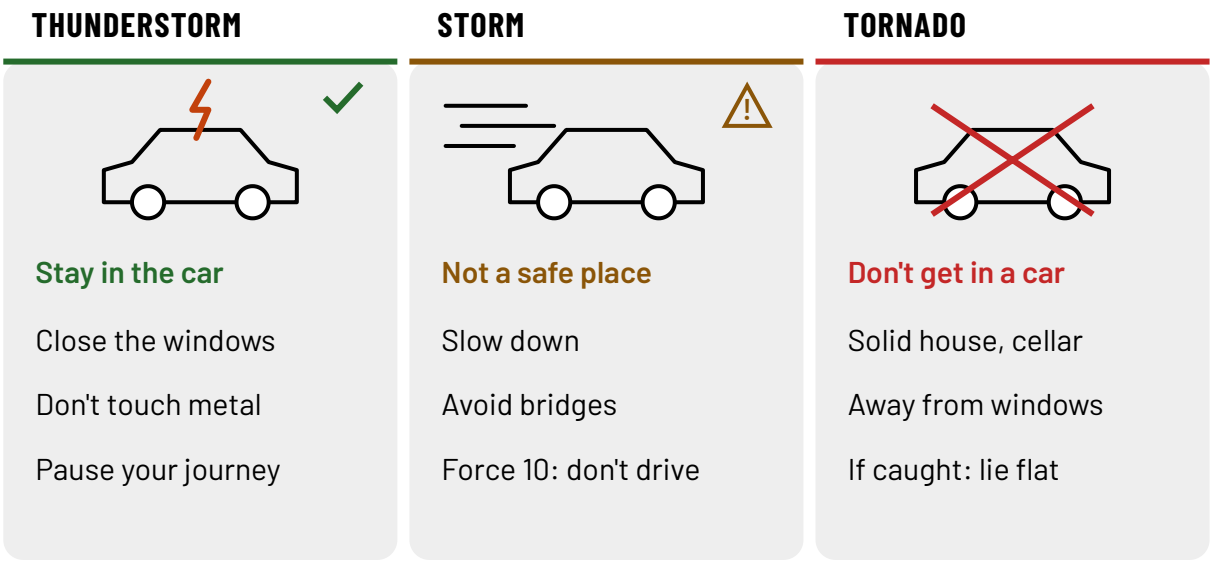
Crouch position in a thunderstorm without shelter: crouch in a hollow, feet close together on the balls of your feet, arms around your knees, head on your knees. Don't lie down. At least 10 metres from trees, 1 to 3 metres from other people.

Thunderstorms on the move

- **Stay in the car.** A metal body acts as a Faraday cage; the current flows away over the outside (VDE|ABB). Close the windows and don't touch any bare metal parts (BBK, Met Office). In a severe

thunderstorm, pause your journey – lightning and thunder are startling, heavy rain takes away your view, traffic lights can fail (VDE|ABB).

- **Convertible:** only protects with the roof closed and held by metal struts above the occupants. Motorhomes with a plastic body offer no protection (VDE|ABB).
- **Bike and motorbike:** stop immediately and look for a building. If there isn't one, crouch at least 3 m from your bike, ideally on tarmac (VDE|ABB).
- **Hiking and in the mountains:** get off peaks, ridges and hills (CDC). Caves, overhangs and the foot of rock faces offer some protection, keeping at least 1 m, better 3 m, from the rock wall. Don't touch steel cables, wet ropes, ladders or metal grids. Thunderstorms also increase the risk of rockfall (VDE|ABB).
- **Tent and hut:** A tent without a metal frame is as dangerous as an open field. Wooden huts and shelters without lightning protection are life-threatening. If there is a building or car nearby, go there (VDE|ABB, CDC).



The car in severe weather: in a thunderstorm a car with a metal body protects you, stay inside, windows closed. In a storm it is not a safe place, don't drive from wind force 10. In a tornado don't get into a car, go into a solid building.

Hail

1. **Take shelter** in a building or vehicle (BBK).
2. **Close windows, doors and skylights** and stay away from unprotected openings (BBK).
3. **Roller shutters:** If they are not hail-resistant enough, the BBK advises raising them – otherwise they may break sooner than the windows.
4. **Keep an eye on drains and windows:** blocked drains make water back up, damaged windows let rain in. In an emergency, 112 (BBK).
5. **In the car:** in heavy hail, pull over somewhere safe and stay in the car (Met Office).

6. **Outdoors without shelter:** for hail alone, the BBK advises lying flat and protecting your head and neck with your hands. If there is lightning and thunder at the same time, the thunderstorm rule applies: crouch, don't lie down (BBK, VDE|ABB).

Tornado

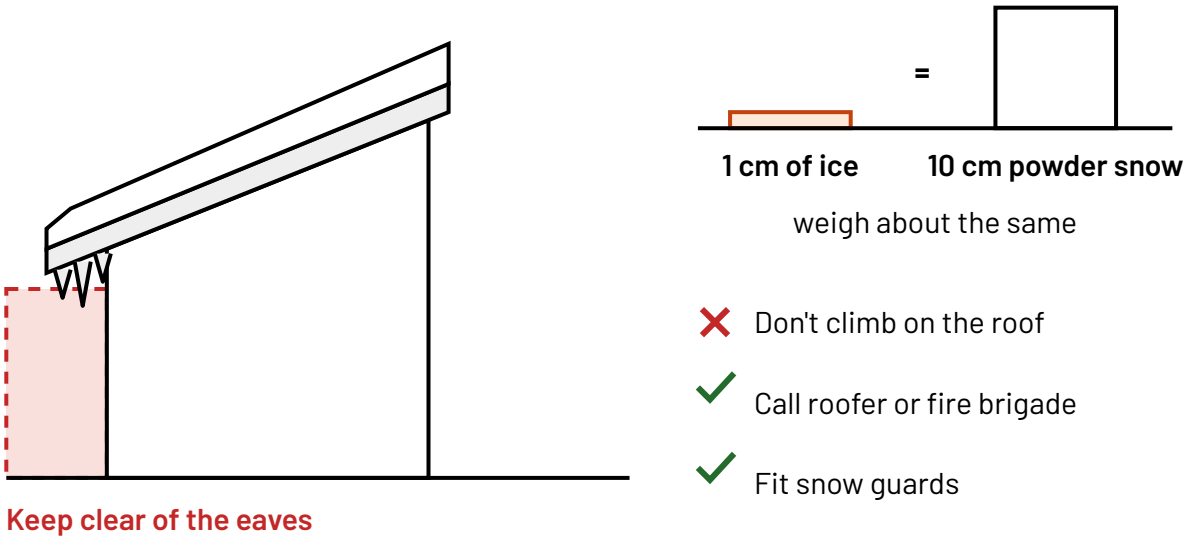
In a tornado, **different rules apply than in a thunderstorm** (DWD):

1. **Don't get into a car.** A tornado can lift a car dozens of metres into the air.
2. **Go into a solid stone house or the cellar.** If there is water in the cellar, stay out (BBK, see Floods).
3. **Away from windows and doors:** they don't protect you from flying debris.
4. **Outdoors, get out of the way:** most tornadoes are no wider than 100 m; a distance of one kilometre is enough.
5. **Caught by surprise?** If necessary, lie flat on the ground. Weaker tornadoes may then pass over you, and the risk of being hit by debris is lowest.

Snow, slippery roads and black ice

1. **Stay at home if you can** when there are warnings of heavy snowfall or slippery conditions (BBK). If you have to drive: adapt your driving, expect disruption up to road closures, fill up the tank, take blankets and warm drinks (DWD).
2. **When there is a warning of significant slippery conditions,** the DWD advises avoiding woods and the vicinity of masts and power lines – ice can break things there.
3. **On foot:** keep clear of sloping roofs and gutters – snow sliding off roofs and icicles can injure you (BBK).
4. **Don't clear the roof yourself:** in prolonged snowfall, call a roofer or the fire brigade to assess and clear the load – climbing onto the roof yourself is too dangerous because of the risk of slipping and collapse (BBK).
5. **Watch the roof:** How much snow is there? Are load-bearing parts sagging unusually? If snow that could slide off can't be removed straight away, keep pedestrians away with warning signs or a barrier (BBK).
6. **Only walk on ice on lakes and ponds** where the authorities have allowed it – the ice rules of the German Life Saving Association (DLRG) state at least 15 cm thickness. If it cracks or crackles: lie flat and crawl back the way you came. If someone falls through: 112 (BBK).

SNOW AND ICE ON THE ROOF



Snow on the roof: 1 centimetre of ice weighs as much as 10 centimetres of powder snow. Keep clear of the eaves because of sliding snow and icicles. Don't climb onto the roof yourself, call a roofer or the fire brigade. Snow guards help.

During a power cut

If the power goes off, the guide Power cut helps: switch on a battery radio, keep the fridge and freezer closed, save your phone battery. In winter see Keeping warm without heating.

If someone has been struck by lightning

This does not replace a first aid course.

1. **Watch out for yourself:** if the storm is still going on, there is still danger – for you and the injured person (CDC).
2. **Call 112.** Mobile phones are safe to use (CDC, BBK).
3. **Don't be afraid to touch them:** people struck by lightning carry no electrical charge, you can touch them straight away (CDC).
4. **Check breathing.** A lightning strike can cause cardiac arrest. If the person is not breathing normally: start chest compressions and keep going until help arrives. Steps in the guide First aid.
5. **If the person is breathing,** look for burns, shock and other injuries (CDC). Burns are often severe and the lightning may have affected the heart – so always get help (Met Office).

Sources for this section: BBK "Was tun bei Sturm, Gewitter und Hagel?", "Naturgefahr Gewitter", "Naturgefahr Hagel", "Schneelast", "Vorsorge und Handeln bei Kälte und Schneefall", Max und Flocke "Blitzgescheit" (2017), DWD hazard notes and recommendations, DWD tornado brochure (4/2022), VDE|ABB (2018, 2019, 2021), ADAC (1/2026), Met Office, GOV.UK "Storms", CDC (6/2026).

AFTERWARDS

Safety first

- **Injured people:** give first aid and, if needed, call the ambulance service on 112 (BBK).
- **Power lines: never touch** electricity or telephone cables that have come down or are hanging, and keep well away – high voltage can jump gaps without warning (GOV.UK, Met Office). Fallen trees often bring poles and lines down with them (nidirect). In danger call 112, otherwise your grid operator's fault service.
- **Damaged house:** If your home is badly damaged, stay outside until professionals have declared it safe. If the roof is badly damaged, keep a good distance from the house and call the fire brigade (112). Broken roof tiles can still fall (BBK).
- **Trees, walls, woods:** What the storm has weakened can still fall – keep your distance (Met Office). In the woods, loose branches and fallen trees can still injure you. Follow the authorities' advice and if in doubt ask your municipality whether it is safe to go in (BBK).
- **Cellar with water:** Be careful if the main electrical connection box is in the cellar – risk of electric shock. Only use electrical devices if they haven't got damp. If heating oil has leaked: fire brigade 112 (BBK). Everything else in the guide Floods.
- **After a lightning strike,** have the lightning protection system checked (BBK). If your car was struck, have the electronics checked (VDE|ABB).
- **After a long period of snow load,** check the roof and roof structure for damage; if anything is deformed, get a specialist (BBK).
- **Check on others:** neighbours and relatives who might need help – and help them organise repairs (Met Office).

AFTER THE STORM

1	**Never touch power lines**	Keep away, danger: 112
2	**Avoid woods and trees**	Branches can still fall
3	**Damaged roof**	Keep away, fire brigade 112
4	**Take photos first**	then clear up, insurer
5	**Check on others**	Who needs help?

After the storm: 1. never touch power lines, keep away, 112. 2. avoid woods and trees, branches can still fall. 3. damaged roof, keep away, fire brigade. 4. photos first, then clear up. 5. ask neighbours whether they need help.

Documenting and insurance

1. **Look and take photos first, then clear up:** the BBK advises checking carefully and documenting before you clear up what has been damaged, for example by water or broken glass. Take detailed photos or videos of all the damage (Verbraucherzentrale).
2. **Inform your insurer immediately and truthfully** and get statements confirmed in writing (Verbraucherzentrale).
3. **Limit the damage:** have a damaged roof sealed temporarily, pump water out of the cellar. Only throw away broken things once the insurer has agreed (Verbraucherzentrale).
4. **Tradespeople:** agree scope, timing and price in writing and check with the insurer first. The insurer's loss adjuster is paid by the insurer – they are not an independent expert (Verbraucherzentrale).

Which insurance pays for what in Germany (Verbraucherzentrale, as of 8/2026):

- **Storm** only counts from wind force 8, i.e. about 62 km/h. If the wind force can no longer be established, storm damage is often recognised anyway, for example if neighbouring houses were damaged too.
- **Buildings insurance:** storm damage to roof, windows and roller shutters, hail damage and direct lightning strikes.
- **Contents insurance:** storm damage to things in your home.
- **Surges** caused by lightning are usually only covered with a separate clause.
- **Car:** partial comprehensive cover (Teilkasko) pays for a parked car hit by roof tiles or a tree, and for hail. If you drive into a fallen tree yourself, that's a case for fully comprehensive cover (Vollkasko).
- **Snow load and sewage backflow** need the add-on for **natural hazards** (Elementarschaden) – see guide Floods.

Learning from it

Once everything has calmed down: What worked, what didn't? What blew away? Restock supplies, batteries and power banks, adjust the family plan and improve one thing. If the storm is still on your mind, that's normal – help in the guide Stress and anxiety in a crisis.

Sources for this section: BBK "Handeln nach Sturm, Gewitter und Hagel", "Naturgefahr Gewitter", "Naturgefahr Hagel", "Schneelast", VDE\|ABB (2019), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026), Met Office, GOV.UK "Storms", nidirect (10/2026).

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Quickly going shopping** or setting off when a severe weather warning is out.
- **Parking under trees** or next to scaffolding.
- **Driving in a storm** and thinking you're safe in the car.

- **Sheltering from a thunderstorm under an isolated tree** – whatever kind of tree.
- **Carrying on swimming** because the storm is "still far away".
- **Lying flat in a thunderstorm** or huddling together as a group.
- **Going back out too early,** although the last thunder was less than 30 minutes ago.
- **Fleeing into a car from a tornado.**
- **Climbing onto a snow-covered roof yourself.**
- **Touching fallen power lines** or getting too close.
- **Clearing up before the damage has been photographed.**

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Warnings set up for home and work districts, warning app installed
- [ ] Radio with batteries or crank, torch, spare batteries
- [ ] Supplies of food and drink, medicine cabinet
- [ ] Fuse box and the grid operator's fault number under "Where's what"
- [ ] Flat, cellar and garden photographed, photos saved
- [ ] Insurance checked: storm, hail, lightning, surges, natural hazards
- [ ] Plan for what comes in from the balcony and garden or gets tied down in a storm
- [ ] Roof, gutters and lightning protection checked (or landlord asked)
- [ ] Branches over the roof cut back, trees looked at
- [ ] Safest room in the house known: inner room, ground floor
- [ ] Sheltered parking place for the car, away from trees and walls
- [ ] Car ready for winter: blanket, warm clothing, torch, charging cable
- [ ] Thunderstorm rules practised with the family: counting seconds, crouch position, 30 minutes
- [ ] Agreed who checks on neighbours or relatives with care needs
- [ ] Pets: safe place indoors

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