



**California Central Coast Chapter**

**Santa Barbara County**  
1528 Chapala St., #204  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101  
Tel: 805.892.4259

120 E. Jones St, #113  
Santa Maria, CA 93454  
Tel: 805.636.6432

**San Luis Obispo County**  
71 Zaca Ln Suite 110  
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401  
Tel: 805.547.3830

**Ventura County**  
2580 E. Main St Suite 201  
Ventura, CA 93003  
Tel: 805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:  
**800.272.3900**  
alz.org/CaCentral

## Disaster Situation: Are you Prepared?

The recent earthquake in Japan has triggered a series of catastrophic events that directly affected the entire Japanese population, also bringing potential consequences to the rest of the world.

In our thoughts and concerns for the countless families affected by this tragedy, we are also reminded of how Japanese preparedness played a significant difference in survival rates. Experts say that if the same events had happened in less prepared countries, the death toll would have been exponentially higher.

Californians are not unfamiliar with natural disasters like earthquakes, fires and mudslides. Most of our households have evacuation plans and well-stocked emergency kits. But how prepared are you to assist your loved one with dementia in a disaster situation? If you have to evacuate your loved one in minutes, do you know what to take with you? How are you going to keep him calm and reassured?

Here are some considerations that every caregiver should know before a disaster occurs:

### Advance preparations

- If your loved one lives in a residential facility, find out about its disaster and evacuation plans. Ask if you will be responsible for evacuating your loved one.
- Whether your loved one

lives with you or you are a long-distance caregiver, make sure evacuation plans include her specific needs. Check your local Alzheimer's Association and other organizations that provide services for the elderly to see if help is available.

- Enroll in MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®, a 24-hour nationwide emergency response service for individuals with Alzheimer's or related dementia who wander or who have a medical emergency. Call toll-free at 1(888)572-8566 or visit [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org).
- If you are already enrolled in MedicAlert + Safe Return, make sure your information is up to date.

### If you know a pending disaster is about to occur:

- Get yourself and the person with Alzheimer's to a safe place.
- If the need to leave quickly is likely, do not delay. Try to leave as early as possible to minimize long delays in heavy traffic.
- Alert others (family, friends, medical personnel) that you are changing locations, and give them your contact information. Contact them regularly as you move.
- Be sure there are people oth-



er than the primary caregiver who have copies of the person's medical history, medications, physician information and family contacts.

- Purchase extra medications.
- If your loved one uses oxygen, be sure to obtain portable tanks.

### Emergency kit

Consider preparing an emergency kit in advance. Keep it in a watertight container and store it in an easily accessible location. Your emergency kit might include:

- Easy on/off clothes (a couple of sets).
- Supplies of medication (or minimally, a list of medications with dosages).
- Velcro shoes/sneakers.
- A spare pair of eyeglasses.
- Incontinence products.
- Extra identification items for the person, such as an ID bracelet and clothing tags.

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## Caregiver Tips

### Helpful hints during an episode of agitation:

- ☀️ Approach the person from the front and use his or her name.
- ☀️ Use calm, positive statements and a patient, low-pitched voice. Reassure.
- ☀️ Respond to the emotions being expressed rather than the content of the words. For example, say, "You're frightened and want to go home. It's OK. I'm right here with you."
- ☀️ Don't argue with the person or try to correct. Instead, affirm his or her experience, reassure and try to divert attention. For example, "The noise in this shelter is frightening. Let's see if we can find a quieter spot. Let's look at your photo book together."
- ☀️ Give clearly stated directions for each step. Complete one step at a time. The person no longer has the ability to think of several things at once and may be overwhelmed in trying to keep track of multiple events, statement, questions or directions.
- ☀️ Use gentle physical touch to calm person. Holding hands and hugging may be comforting for some people with dementia, but perceived as restraining by others.

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- Copies of legal documents such as a power of attorney.
- Copies of medical documents that indicate the individual's condition and current medications.
- Copies of insurance and Social Security cards.
- Use waterproof bags to hold medications and documents.
- Physician's name, address and phone numbers (including cell phone).
- Recent picture of the person with dementia.
- Hand lotion or other items to provide comfort.
- Bottled water.
- Favorite items or foods, liquid meals.
- Pillow, toy or something else to hug.
- Alzheimer's Association and MedicAlert + Safe Return phone numbers.

### During an evacuation

People with dementia are especially vulnerable to chaos and emotional trauma. They have a limited ability to understand what is happening, and they may forget what they have been told about the disaster. Be alert to potential reactions that may result from changes in routine, traveling or new environments.

- When appropriate, inform others (hotel or shelter staff, family members, airline attendants) that your loved one has dementia and may not understand what is happening.
- Do not leave the person alone. It only takes a few minutes to wander away and get lost.
- Changes in routine, traveling and new environments can cause:
  - Agitation
  - Wandering



***For more information on disaster preparation you can order or download for free:***

**The Calm Before the Storm: Family Conversations about Disaster Planning, Caregiving, Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia**

This publication helps caregivers better plan for natural disasters by talking to – and planning with – family, friends and others. It includes a variety of worksheets, checklists and helpful resources.

- Increase in behavioral symptoms, including hallucinations, delusions and sleep disturbance.
- Do your best to remain calm. The person with dementia will respond to the emotional tone you set.



### Tips for preventing agitation

- Reassure the person. Hold hands or put your arm on his or her shoulder. Say things are going to be fine.
- Find outlets for anxious energy. Take a walk together or engage the person in simple tasks.
- Redirect the person's attention if he or she becomes upset.
- Move the person to a safer or quieter place, if possible. Limit stimulation.
- Make sure the person takes medications as scheduled.
- Try to schedule regular meals and maintain a regular sleep schedule.
- Avoid elaborate or detailed explanations. Provide information using concrete terms. Follow brief explanations with reassurance.
- Be prepared to provide additional assistance with all activities of daily living.
- Pay attention to cues that the person may be overwhelmed (fidgeting, pacing).
- Remind the person that he or she is in the right place.

### Take care of yourself

- Take care of yourself by finding a good listener to hear your thoughts and feelings about the event.
- Find moments to breathe, meditate and reflect.

### MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®

A 24-hour nationwide emergency response service for individuals with Alzheimer's or related dementia who wander or have a medical emergency.

Sign up today: **1.888.572.8566**

**[www.medicalert.org/safereturn](http://www.medicalert.org/safereturn)**