

CRS Emergency Preparedness Newsletter

August 2026

Learn Utility Safety — Know What to Shut Off, and When

This month's goal: know where your shutoffs are, know when to use them, and practice before an emergency.

Why Utility Safety Matters

A major earthquake, winter storm, fire, or power outage can damage gas lines, propane tanks, water heaters, plumbing, electrical wiring, and outdoor utility connections. This Newsletter covers utility safety topics, highlights propane safety, electrical shutoff, water shutoff, and the importance of knowing where these systems are located before a disaster.

Find it. Label it. Practice it. Teach someone else.

- Where the main electrical panel is.
- Where the main water shutoff is and have the appropriate shutoff tool.
- Where the water heater shutoff is.
- Where the propane shutoff is, if applicable.
- Where outdoor propane tanks, spare cylinders, and fuel storage are located.
- Who in the household can safely shut things off.
- When not to touch a utility because the situation is unsafe.

Do Not Shut Off Utilities Automatically

- **Shut off propane or gas** if you smell gas, hear hissing, see damage, or suspect a leak.
- **Shut off electricity** if you see sparks, broken wires, burning smells, smoke, water near electrical equipment, or damaged wiring.
- **Shut off water** if there is a broken pipe, water heater leak, damaged plumbing, flooding, or concern that household water lines are damaged.

When in doubt, move people to safety first and call for help from a safe location.

Propane and Gas Safety

When to shut off propane or gas (always use gloves)

- You smell gas, often described as rotten eggs.
- You hear a hissing sound.
- You see damaged piping, regulator, tank, or appliance connection.
- A tank has shifted, fallen, or been struck.
- There is fire near a propane tank or gas appliance.

If you suspect a leak, do not use matches, lighters, electrical switches, doorbells, or anything that could create a spark. Leave the area and call for help from a safe location. If propane is shut off after a suspected leak or earthquake damage, do not turn it back on yourself; have the system checked by a qualified technician or propane supplier.

Propane safety tasks for August

- Find and label your propane shutoff valve.
- Label the valve if it is not obvious.
- Ask your propane supplier how and when to shut it off.
- Ask whether your system has or should have an automatic seismic shutoff valve or excess-flow protection.
- Check that propane tanks are upright and stable.
- Keep vegetation, dry debris, and stored items away from the tank.
- Never store spare propane cylinders in a garage, house, enclosed area, on their sides or laying down.
- Never store a spare propane tank under a grill.
- Do not try to repair a damaged tank or valve yourself.

Electricity Safety

Electricity can be dangerous after an earthquake, flood, fire, or storm. Damaged wiring can cause shock, fire, or sparks that could ignite leaking gas. If there is a major outage, turn off the circuit breakers since there may be major pulses of power when turned on that could damage electronics (which more and more are in our appliances).

When to shut off electricity

- Sparks.
- Smoke.
- Burning insulation smell.
- Broken, frayed, or exposed wires.
- Damaged outlets or electrical panels.
- Water near electrical equipment.
- A fallen tree or branch on electrical service lines.
- Appliances that were damaged in an earthquake, fire, or flood.

How to prepare

- Find your main electrical panel.
- Label key circuits if they are not already labeled.
- Know which breaker is the main shutoff - But turn off all the others first.
- Practice turning off individual breakers when conditions are normal.
- Keep a flashlight near the panel.
- Keep the panel accessible. Do not block it with boxes or storage.
- Do not use extension cords as permanent wiring.
- Do not run cords under rugs or carpets.
- Inspect outdoor cords and tools for cracked insulation, broken plugs, or damaged housings.
- In a nod to July's Fire Safety Newsletter, you can put a fire blanket by the panel.

Water Shutoff Safety

Water damage after an earthquake or pipe break can quickly damage a house and make other hazards worse. A broken pipe near electrical wiring, a leaking water heater, or damaged plumbing can create both safety and property risks.

When to shut off water

- A pipe breaks.
- A water heater leaks or shifts after an earthquake - It could become a water supply.
- Water is flowing where it should not be.
- Water is near electrical equipment.
- You suspect damage to plumbing.
- You are leaving home during an emergency and want to reduce damage risk.

August water tasks

- Find the main household water shutoff.
- Find the shutoff valve for the water heater.
- Label both valves.
- Make sure you can reach them.
- Make sure a tool is available if one is needed.
- Show another household member where they are.
- If you have a curb or meter shutoff, learn whether residents are allowed to use it or whether the utility should be called.

Water Heater Safety

Water heaters are important in earthquake preparedness for two reasons. First, a damaged water heater can leak. Second, a properly secured water heater may preserve a useful supply of emergency water.

- Check whether your water heater is strapped or braced.
- Make sure the straps are attached to wall studs or proper supports.
- Check whether water lines are flexible and not rigidly stressed.
- Know how to turn off power or propane/gas to the water heater.
- Know how to turn off the water supply to the water heater.
- Keep the area around the water heater clear.
- Do not drain or use water from a damaged water heater if there is any concern about contamination, broken glass, chemical spill, or unsafe access.

Power Outage Safety

A power outage can affect more than lights. It can affect heat, refrigeration, well pumps, phones, internet, medical equipment, garage doors, security systems, cooking, and communication.

- Keep flashlights or lanterns where you can find them.
- Keep spare batteries charged.
- Keep phones and battery banks charged.

- Know how to open your garage door manually. If the house shifts, that may not be possible.
- Plan for refrigerated medications.
- Keep refrigerators and freezers closed during an outage.
- Turn off or unplug sensitive electronics if power is unstable.
- Check that stoves, ovens, irons, space heaters, and appliances are off when power returns.
- Never use a generator, propane stove, grill, or charcoal indoors or in a garage.

HEAT PUMP EMERGENCY GUIDE

If you experience a power failure you may want to turn off the breaker to the heat pump & air handler in the breaker panel to protect the unit from the amperage fluctuations that sometimes accompany brownouts and blackouts (power outages). After the power has been restored you can turn the breaker back on. It may take several minutes for the heat pump to fully engage and start heating/cooling.

For long-term protection against surges, consider having an electrician install a surge protector **or** line voltage monitor.

Signs of power surge damage include:

- The system isn't blowing warm/cold air or isn't heating/cooling your home properly or a failure to maintain set temperatures.
- Circuit breakers trip frequently when the system is running.
- Strange noises, like buzzing or clicking indicative of relay or compressor failure.
- Unusual smells, like burning odors suggesting scorched wiring or board failure.

Generator, Grill, and Carbon Monoxide Safety

Carbon monoxide is especially dangerous because it cannot be seen or smelled. Never use a generator, charcoal grill, propane grill, camp stove, gasoline-powered tool, or portable fuel-burning heater indoors or in a garage unless it is specifically designed and labeled for indoor use.

Keep generators outdoors and far from doors, windows, vents, and garages. Make sure carbon monoxide alarms are working.

- Show another household member where the shutoffs are.

Pick One Thing This Week

- Find your electrical panel.
- Find your main water shutoff and know / have the appropriate shut off tool.
- Label one important breaker.
- Find and label your propane shutoff.
- Put a flashlight near your utility panel.
- Ask a neighbor if they know where their shutoffs are.
- Make a power-outage plan.
- Check your carbon monoxide alarms.

Useful Resources

- Clallam County Prepare in a Year — August Learn Utility Safety: <https://www.clallamcountywa.gov/1759/Prepare-in-a-Year>
- Washington State Department of Health — Turning Off the Utilities: <https://doh.wa.gov/emergencies/be-prepared-be-safe/severe-weather-and-natural-disasters/turning-utilities>
- American Red Cross — Power Outage Safety: <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/power-outage.html>
- American Red Cross — Checking Your Home's Utilities: <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/disaster-relief-and-recovery-services/utilities-major-systems.html>
- FEMA Earthquake Safety Checklist: https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_b-526-eq-safety-checklist.pdf

Closing Thought

Utility safety is not about doing complicated repairs. It is about knowing where things are, recognizing danger signs, shutting things off only when appropriate, and getting people away from hazards. A few minutes spent finding and labeling shutoffs now can save time, damage, and possibly