

How to Pack a "Go Bag" for Emergency Evacuations



A few weeks ago, a fire sparked on a tiny trail on the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains in Anaheim, California. It moved fast, and through news reports, we watched it snake its way toward our sleepy, suburban neighborhood. By evening, there were mandatory evacuations about half a mile away from us.

It took me and my husband two hours to get home from work due to the road closures, and once there, we needed to evacuate, too. (Luckily, my two kids were with my mother, away from the fire.) I rushed around grabbing valuables and clothing. But then I froze. I had no idea what I was supposed to pack. Sentimental photos? Artwork? I looked around my home and wondered what I could afford to lose. A neighbor reminded me to pack our important papers, and I remembered to wear the antique jewelry my grandmother left me. But I was so panicked that all I ended up with were suitcases full of ill-fitting clothes, passports and paintings. (To my credit, I did not forget to pack the cat.)

Out of the many folks hit hard by fires in California this season, we ended up very lucky. It grew to about 5,000 acres, but half a day after the fire started, the winds died down and firefighters were able to contain it away from our homes.

According to FEMA, evacuations are pretty common in the United States. Aside from natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes and hurricanes, people are often told to leave their homes due to transportation and industrial accidents. Our canyon fire pushed me to become more prepared should a disaster strike again.

Here's how to prepare a evacuation "go bag" that you can quickly grab in case you ever need to evacuate.

Choose a bag. Each member of the family should have his or her own. Start with a backpack or a nylon camper's laundry bag with a drawstring.

Take photos of all the rooms in your home, along with all your valuables. Store these photos on a cloud server, and back them up on a flash drive.

Scan all your important documents, and save them on a flash drive. You could also save them onto a cloud server if you have an encryption service you trust.

These documents include:

- Driver's license
- The deed to your house
- Your will and/or trust
- Proof of insurance
- Medical records
- Passports
- Social security cards
- Birth certificates
- A list of personal contacts with their addresses and phone numbers
- Your kids' immunization records
- Your pet's paperwork for vaccinations and medical history

Include the flash drives of your photos and important documents in your bag.

Add essential supplies to help you get by for a few days. This includes water (one gallon per person per day), non-perishable food, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, batteries, clothes, diapers and pet supplies. Ready.gov has a full [emergency kit checklist](#) that you can download.

Create an evacuation to-do list. Note the items you will want to pack during an emergency: your "go bag," your pets, and a list of valuables (jewelry, paintings, photos) you can't live without. Also list your action items, such as turning off utilities and locking up your house. When you need to evacuate, break out the evacuation to-do list, check off each item, and get the hell out.