

## Tornado safety tips to keep you ahead of the storm

By Amy G. Hadachek  
 “We have a tornado warning!” I yelled to our storm chasing team. “A tornado warning is now in effect until 7:30 pm,” squawked the automated voice on the National Weather Service weather radio, followed by vital tornado safety tips. Listening intently while staring at the menacing black cloud to the west, with widened eyes I also observed the thunderstorm’s massive anvil occupying two-thirds of the southwestern Nebraska sky.

Easily categorized as on-the-job training; while traveling that week with our university chase team and severe weather professor, powerful storms each day matched photographs we’d only seen in textbooks. This rotating storm before us, a sign of powerfully increasing strength, was a classic lesson in severe storm features.

Before hopping back in the vehicle, the western sky again commanded our attention, as streaks of blazing orange splashed across the jet black collapsing thunderstorm — resembling a painting and an inspirational finale to our 11-hour day.

A severe thunderstorm differs from a so-called ‘garden variety’ thunderstorm, as a severe thunderstorm has wind gusts to at least 58 miles per hour, and/or hail to at least one inch in diameter, and/or a tornado.

On the Storm Prediction Center’s Tornado Safety Tips page, Roger Edwards recommends making a survival items list and practicing these tornado safety tips.

- At home, have a family tornado plan in place and know where to take shelter in mere seconds. Yearly, practice a family tornado drill. Have a predetermined place to meet after a disaster.

- Flying debris is the greatest danger in tornadoes. Store protective coverings (mattress, sleeping bags, thick blankets) in or near your shelter space; ready to use on a few seconds notice. When a tornado watch is issued, remember the drill. Take action immediately. Turn on local TV, radio or NOAA Weather Radio and stay alert for warnings.

- Have enough water to drink for three days, and ‘low maintenance’ food.

- Think ‘low’ and ‘middle.’ Low means get in a basement or storm shelter. If none, go to the lowest floor. Middle means a middle (or central) room like a bathroom, closet, or under a stairwell, away from windows.

- Crouch as low as possible to the floor, facing down. Cover your head with your hands. A bathtub may offer a shell of partial protection. A helmet can offer some protection against head injury.

- Mobile homes are not safe. It’s recommended residents have a plan to go to a nearby permanent structure.

- Vehicles are extremely risky in a tornado. Seek shelter in a sturdy building, or underground if possible. If caught by extreme winds or flying debris, park the car as quickly and safely as possible —out of traffic lanes. If you can safely get lower than the level of the roadway, leave your car and lie in that area, covering your head with your hands. Avoid seeking shelter under bridges, which can create deadly traffic hazards while offering little protection against flying debris.

- Avoid trees; as all thunderstorms contain lightning and can trigger flooding in torrential downpours.





- Knowing what size generator to have available if the power grid goes down may be a lifesaver.

It’s also important to know the facts about floods. A concern in any thunderstorm is livestock. “Cattle like to get in corners near fences. I’ve seen cattle get struck by lightning. Lightning will travel a long distance down a fence, and down barbed wire —and can kill cattle even a distance from the initial lightning strike point,” said Warning Coordination Meteorologist, Patrick Gilchrist.

Regarding tornado safety tips for livestock, ranchers agree that cattle pretty much take care of themselves. “Normally, cattle use their instincts by getting in valleys and low spots,” said farmer/rancher, Larry Hadachek. “There’s not much more you can do. Even if you had a big enough barn to put cattle in, the tornado could take the barn and all your livestock with it. At least in a pasture, cattle are not all in one bunch, but are spread out.”

Rancher, Brenda Hoard said, “It’s a natural instinct for any livestock - if you try to handle them or mess with them, it makes them nervous. They’re not animals to pet. We raise

## Understanding Severe Thunderstorm Risk Categories

THUNDERSTORMS (no label)	1 - MARGINAL (MRGL)	2 - SLIGHT (SLGT)	3 - ENHANCED (ENH)	4 - MODERATE (MDT)	5 - HIGH (HIGH)
No severe* thunderstorms expected	Isolated severe thunderstorms possible	Scattered severe storms possible	Numerous severe storms possible	Widespread severe storms likely	Widespread severe storms expected
Lightning/flooding threats exist with all thunderstorms	Limited in duration and/or coverage and/or intensity	Short-lived and/or not widespread, isolated intense storms possible	More persistent and/or widespread, a few intense	Long-lived, widespread and intense	Long-lived, very widespread and particularly intense
					

\* NWS defines a severe thunderstorm as measured wind gusts to at least 58 mph, and/or hail to at least one inch in diameter, and/or a tornado. All thunderstorm categories imply lightning and the potential for flooding. Categories are also tied to the probability of a severe weather event within 25 miles of your location.



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them for commercial purposes. Yes, we’re going to keep them comfortable in all types of weather. But just like when they have a calf, or there’s a tornado or flood, they know what to do.”

Hail is nothing to take lightly, for two key reasons: what it can do, and what can be behind it...as another storm chasing day vividly confirmed.

“OMG! We need to stay far from that storm,” I pointed south, to my chase buddy Greg, on a southern Oklahoma chase day. “There’s large hail in that one. Let’s turn around now!” In addition to data on our laptop computer indicating large hail, the weather radio bulletins were reporting large hail. In meteorology classes, I learned if heading into an onslaught of hail in a severe thunderstorm, right behind the hail core is the eerie location where a tornado can form.

With weather radio in-hand and equipped with a backup battery, Greg and I quickly wrapped up our storm chasing day. Now it was all about tornado safety tips.

A half hour later, we caught up with other chaser friends who no longer had a windshield in their jeep. The hail was so large

and powerful that it ejected out a longer distance than expected and crashed atop their vehicle.

The basic rules for tornado safety tips are worth repeating and clipping on the refrigerator, or a highly-visible spot at home, and the office. “I think the most important rules are to have multiple methods of receiving weather information (weather radio, smartphones, TV/Radio, etc.) and to develop and test your family’s severe weather plan in advance,” recommended Bill Bunting, Chief of Forecast Operations; NOAA/NWS Storm Prediction Center based in Norman, Okla. “With these two rules, and an understanding of the meaning of weather terms like a watch, warning, severe thunderstorm, folks will be prepared for any storm situation.”

Here’s an easy way to remember the difference between a watch and a warning:

A watch means conditions are favorable for that type of weather (tornado, severe thunderstorm or other). Think, “Watch out! This is possible. Get a plan ready.”

A warning means a red warning light should be going off in our heads! A warning for a severe thunderstorm, tornado,

or other, means THAT particular type of weather has been spotted or is imminent. Take Action NOW!

To further simplify the words in a watch or warning, the National Weather Service is now including three significant words specifically: What, Where, and When.

“The watch or warning will include the word: WHAT and explain what the watch is about, then list the word WHERE to detail the location, and the word WHEN with information about the timing,” said Eli Jacks, Chief, Forecast Services Division; National Weather Service Headquarters. The new GOES-16 (Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite), replacing GOES-East and highly touted for detecting wildfires and the intense eyewall of hurricanes, is also an asset to thunderstorm monitoring. It takes images every 30 seconds, more frequently than many radars.

“With that frequency of information, meteorologists can use the GOES-16 imagery to determine how the air around a thunderstorm is changing,” said Jordan Gerth, Ph.D., and Research Meteorologist with the University of Wisconsin.

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