

TWISTER

TALES

Four Dangerous Tornado Myths

Learn the truth behind these myths and protect your family.

by Jen Henderson

It's that time of year again. Temperatures warm up, the air is humid, and thunderstorms become more frequent. Of course, following closely on the heels of those claps of thunder and flashes of lightning is the threat of severe weather, especially tornadoes.

While Alabama took the most recent brunt of the force of Mother Nature, Coulee Region residents skirt the fringe of Tornado Alley. While every storm doesn't necessarily lead to a tornado, straight-line winds and the potential threat make it important to know the facts about tornadoes and how to respond to protect your family.

Myth #1: Open windows to equalize pressure in the house.

TRUTH: Taking time to open windows won't save your house, but could certainly cost you your life. According to John Schroeder, director of the Wind Science and Engineering Research Center at Texas Tech, this is a common misunderstanding—and a deadly one.

"Keep your windows closed," Schroeder says. "Opening a window has the potential to actually make things worse by allowing wind to create internal pressure."

In most cases, you only have a few minutes or even seconds to escape a tornado. Immediately move your family to the basement or innermost room of the house, away from windows and exterior walls. An interior bathroom or closet is a good choice if you don't have a basement. Cover yourself with thick blankets, a mattress, or other layer of protection from the debris and stay there until the storm has passed and the tornado warning has expired.

Myth #2: Overpasses are a safe haven in a tornado.

TRUTH: Never park under an overpass or try to outrun a twister. "Many people have seen a video of a camera crew taking shelter under the bridge as a tornado passes over," Schroeder says. "While the camera crew survived the tornado, and bridges are typically stable, the wind flow is accelerated through the confined space between the bridge and the road, creating an even worse situation."

Instead, he suggests that you're better off in a ditch. Get out of your car and lay flat on the ground, covering your head with your hands.

Myth #3: Tornadoes are easy to see when they form.

TRUTH: While movies, such as the cult classic "Twister" or the Discovery Channel's docudrama "Tornado Chasers," often show tornadoes as easily identifiable columns of wind, some are virtually

invisible. Sometimes, tornadoes get wrapped in rain and are difficult to see or the condensation funnel—the trunk of the tornado—is clouded by dust and debris. And many tornadoes strike in the evening when it's too dark to see them.

Don't take chances. If there is a tornado warning, seek shelter immediately, even if you can't see a funnel.

Tornado Watches and Warnings

Tornado Watch:

A tornado watch means tornadoes and other kinds of severe weather are possible in the next several hours. It does not mean tornadoes are imminent, but that you need to be prepared to go to a safe shelter, if a tornado warning is issued.

Tornado Warning:

A tornado warning means that a tornado has been spotted or that Doppler radar has indicated a thunderstorm circulation capable of producing a tornado. When a tornado warning is issued for your town or county, take immediate safety precautions.

Myth #4: Tornadoes can't occur in mountains or big cities.

TRUTH: There is truth to the idea that tornadoes can be unpredictable; they don't pay much attention to geography. Thomas Grazulis, author of "The Tornado: Nature's Ultimate Windstorm" (2003, Oklahoma University Press), suggests that these myths about where tornadoes can and cannot strike persist because they're difficult to dispel—wishful thinking, short memory, and the rarity of such tornadoes. "People hold tightly to these myths," he writes, "just in case they might be true."

The reality is that tornadoes can strike nearly anywhere. In the late 1980s, a tornado swept through Yellowstone National Park, leaving a path of destruction up and down a 10,000-foot mountain, and dozens of big cities have been hit across the country. From Nashville, Tenn., to Salt Lake City, and from Milwaukee to Dallas, no metropolitan area is out of harm's way.

In fact, Grazulis warns that given the increasing concentration of populations in

big cities and the continued expansion of the suburbs, metropolitan areas are at risk.

"It seems inevitable," Grazulis notes, "that a killer tornado with a death toll of 100 or more people will strike the United States sometime in the future."

The peak time for tornadoes in any given region is usually spring, early summer, and again in fall. That's the time when seasonal temperature differences encourage the clash of cold, dry air and moist, warm air over the landscape. This is when you'll want to pay particular attention to weather reports, invest in a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio, and keep an eye to the sky.

After all, the best protection against a tornado is knowledge, and understanding the difference between fact and fiction can keep your family safe. [CPC](#)

Jen Henderson is an experienced storm chaser. She has been published in regional parenting magazines around the country, including Houston Family and New Jersey Family, among others.



LEARN MORE:

To find out more about tornadoes and tornado safety, and to find statistics about tornadoes in your state, visit the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) website: www.noaa.gov



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