

Thunderstorm & Lightning Safety

Thunderstorms are common in Colorado in the summer, as are lightning strikes. Approaching thunderstorms are typically accompanied by a sudden reversal of wind direction, an increase in wind speed, and a sharp drop in temperature. We usually see them in the afternoons, though of course they can happen at any time of day. Given our usual patterns, however, it's a good idea to schedule summer outside activities in the mornings on days when the forecast indicates thunderstorms are likely.

Remember the 30-30 rule:

- If lightning and thunderclaps are coming within 30 seconds of each other, take shelter. Do not leave this shelter until 30 minutes after the storm has passed.
- The best shelter is in a building or hard-topped metal vehicle.

No place outside is safe during a thunderstorm.

At one point, the advice was to crouch down to make yourself a smaller target, etc, but that's no longer recommended because there's no evidence that it helps enough to be relied on. The best advice from the experts is to avoid getting into this situation in the first place — do not plan outside activities when thunderstorms are in the forecast, know where you'll take shelter if one starts, pay attention to the weather so you can get to safety before it's an emergency, and definitely get to safety if you hear any thunder.

If you're outside and can't get to shelter, watch out for the following, which may raise your risk of getting hit:

- Avoid large open areas and ridge tops. You don't want to be the tallest thing around.
- Avoid trees, utility poles, etc. You don't want to be standing next to or under the tallest thing around.
- Avoid wire fences. Lightning can hit the fence somewhere distant from you and travel along it.
- Avoid bunching up. If you're in a group, spread out. Lightning strikes can have a splash-over effect that could hit multiple people in a group at once if they're close together.

If you're in a car, be aware of the following, which may be uncomfortable but are not reasons to leave the shelter of the car:

- If the antenna is hit, which is likely, it may appear to explode in a shower of sparks and metal.
- The vehicle electronics may be damaged or destroyed, rendering the vehicle inoperable.
- One or more tires may be destroyed.
- The rear window may shatter if it has defrosting wires embedded in it.

If you're inside a structure:

- Keep away from windows. Lightning can strike through them.
- Avoid using hardwired phones and any electronics that are plugged in.
- Do not take a bath or shower. The water and metal pipes could conduct electricity if your house gets hit.
- To help save your electronics, unplug them. Surge protectors are a good investment and work well in many cases but aren't able to completely protect electronics from a direct lightning strike.

If your house is struck by lightning:

- An indirect strike (when lightning hits somewhere nearby) can cause damage to electrical systems and units, but isn't likely to cause a fire.
- A direct lightning strike is capable of causing a fire. Fires usually occur near the location of the strike (so are often in roofs and attics) but may occur anywhere along the path the lightning takes to the ground (ie - through the wiring and plumbing systems of the house). Please call 911 if your house suffers a direct lightning strike.

If you're with someone struck by lightning:

- Call 911 immediately.
- Continue to keep yourself safe from the lightning storm (see above).
- People struck by lightning are perfectly safe to touch — they don't retain any electrical charge, as some people believe. They may need immediate first aid care (CPR, etc) so please don't hesitate to do what you can to help.
- Possible injuries include: stopped heartbeat or respiration, burns, hearing/vision loss, damage to nervous system, injuries to muscles, ligaments and/or bones (the muscles contract violently, sometimes hard enough to break bones).

For more information on lightning strikes and safety, visit the website of the National Lightning Safety Council (<http://lightningsafetycouncil.org/>).

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