

Complications and Fatalities After Major Disasters: The Hidden Health Burden of Chronic Illness

For Immediate Release

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New York - The National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute (NCDP) released a new report that sheds light on the unique needs of people with chronic diseases in preparing for and recovering from natural disasters.

The report, titled "Chronic Disease After Natural Disasters: Public Health, Policy, and Provider Perspectives" also provides recommendations on how to improve our ability to manage this as part of our disaster response systems.

The estimated cumulative cost of natural disasters in 2017 was over \$300 billion. Additionally, over 60% of Americans have at least one chronic condition, and over 40% have multiple, the report found.

According to Dr. Irwin Redlener, director of NCDP and a co-author on the report, "In planning for and responding to large-scale disasters, failing to understand and meet the needs of people with chronic health conditions can result in increased fatalities and disease complications during response and recovery. Better preparedness for meeting the unique needs of this population are also key for avoiding the large number of indirect deaths that were a result of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, and after so many other disasters."

"There is fledgling research in this area, but little has been translated and into real-time preparedness and response effort," said Dr. Amit Suneja, the lead author of the report, "We are underprepared for handling the unique needs of individuals with chronic disease during and after disasters, and this report addresses specific solutions for adjusting current systems to do exactly that."

"We are a nation increasingly suffering from long term health problems," the report noted. "If we do not give special consideration to the needs of this group, events will only grow to be more devastating to all our families and communities, no matter the type of disaster or where it strikes next."

Individuals with chronic conditions require special attention in the planning, response and recovery phases of disasters, given their unique needs for a stable supply chain of vital medications, medical equipment, continued medical care, and the potential for exacerbation of their conditions that require resource-intensive management. But in addition to exacerbating existing diseases, disasters also contribute to the development of new chronic illnesses.

Key findings include:

- Current efforts are good, but fragmented and do not fully account for the needs of this population. For example, local governments, the private sector, and community groups are not coordinating well to prepare for disasters.
- Current programs and resources that do exist are not well known or utilized by those with chronic disease, or those that serve them.

The report recommends that government disaster preparedness and recovery stakeholders increase their focus on how to provide better support for people with chronic illnesses, including identifying legal solutions and finding ways to integrate local and non-traditional partners into preparedness activities.

This report is the output of the lead author's capstone project for completion of his M.D. at the Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, with supervision and support from the co-authors at NCDP.

The report is available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8ZP5Q23>

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