



## COUNTY HEALTH MATTERS

### Weekly Column:

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### Don't be blown away!

By Lisa Graham

Do you know what to do when severe weather approaches? Knowing what to do is your best protection in any dangerous situation. Tornadoes, flash floods and lightning are some of the dangers that Warren County residents face throughout the year.

Tornadoes are the most violent atmospheric phenomenon on the planet. When a tornado is coming you have only a short amount of time to make life-or-death decisions, it is important that you have a plan. Since tornadoes can come very quickly you should know the danger signs. Watch for funnel clouds, but be aware that an approaching cloud of debris can mark the location of a tornado even if a funnel is not visible. Before a tornado hits, the wind may die down and the air may become very still. Tornadoes generally occur near the trailing edge of a thunderstorm.

When you are in a home or small building go to the basement or to an interior room on the lowest floor, such as a closet or bathroom. Wrap yourself in overcoats or blankets to protect you from flying debris. Mobile homes and cars should be abandoned immediately. Take cover in a building with a secure foundation or a tornado shelter. If there is no suitable structure nearby, lie flat in the nearest ditch or depression and use your hands to cover your head. Do not seek shelter under an overpass; a ditch or depression is safer.

Flash floods are the #1 weather-related killer with around 140 deaths recorded in the United States each year. In the event you are faced with a flood there are actions you can take to ensure your family's safety. If ordered to evacuate or if rising water is threatening, leave immediately and get to higher ground. Areas that have major problems are "low water crossings". During low water there is usually no problem, but when the water rises, especially quickly as in a flash flood, low water crossings become death traps. It only takes 2 feet of water to make a car float, so never try to drive through a flooded area.

Lightning can be deadly and can strike the ground 10 or more miles away from the thunderstorm. Stay alert to changing weather conditions. It does not have to be raining for lightning to be a threat. If caught outside go to a safe shelter immediately such as inside a sturdy building. A hard top automobile with the windows up can also offer fair protection. Wooded areas offer protection under a thick growth of relatively small trees. Lightning takes the path of least resistance to the ground. Since air is a poor



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conductor, an upright human being is a prime target. Make your self the smallest target possible by squatting low to the ground. Place you hand on your knees with your head between them, while keeping your feet together. This position gives you minimal contact with the ground.

March 15 – 19, 2004 is Missouri Severe Weather Awareness Week. Information and safety tips can be found on the following websites: [www.nws.noaa.gov](http://www.nws.noaa.gov) (National Weather Service); [sema.dps.mo.gov](http://sema.dps.mo.gov) (State Emergency Management Agency); and [warren.lphamo.org](http://warren.lphamo.org) (Warren County Health Department).