

Threat of Tornadoes

Spring is finally on its way! Unfortunately in Missouri that means that along with early blooming flowers, we also have the promise of severe weather. Now is the time to educate ourselves and prepare for the storms that we know will be coming.

Every year about 1,000 tornadoes will form in the US, killing around 60 people. Tornadoes typically travel at around 10 to 20 miles per hour, though they have been known to move as fast as 60 mph. The average tornado stays on the ground about five minutes. People who have been in a tornado say it sounds like a jet engine or a freight train.

Tornadoes come from the energy released in a thunderstorm, and are believed to have wind speeds of up to 300 mph. It is these high wind speeds that cause the damage associated with tornadoes. The biggest threat to humans from tornadoes is from flying debris and from being tossed about in the wind.

Forecasters are able to predict when tornadoes are likely to occur, but it is not yet possible to predict in advance exactly when and where they will develop, how strong they will be, or what path they will follow. The actual detection of tornadoes relies upon Doppler radar and trained storm spotters. This early detection usually gives us about a ten minute warning to seek shelter.

A tornado watch defines where tornadoes and other kinds of severe weather are possible in the next several hours. It means that you need to be alert and prepared to take shelter. A tornado warning means that a tornado has been spotted and you should seek safe shelter immediately.

To keep you and your family safe during a tornado, educate yourself. Work out together where you will go in case a tornado is approaching. Since most tornado injuries are caused by flying debris, protect your family by covering yourselves with a mattress or a couch cushion. Make sure everyone has sturdy shoes and jeans. Put together a tornado kit, with games, books, and even snacks to keep kids busy while they are taking shelter. Use a NOAA Weather Radio to alert your family to danger.

If you are traveling when a tornado strikes, NEVER take shelter under an overpass. Stopping under a bridge to take shelter from a tornado is very dangerous. Deadly flying debris can blast into the space between the bridge and the ground, severely injuring any people taking shelter there. Even when strongly gripping the girders (if they exist), people may be blown loose, out from under the bridge and into the open - possibly well up into the tornado itself. Your best bet is to pull your car off the road and take shelter in a ditch or other low-lying area.

And finally, despite appearances tornadoes do not target mobile home parks. While mobile homes often sustain greater damage than a nearby site built home, that is because mobile homes are often built with lighter-weight materials, which do not hold up well in tornadic winds.

For more information visit Extension "Community Emergency Management Program's website at <http://extension.missouri.edu/cemp/>