

June 2015

Emergency Preparedness Pointers

Thunderbolts and Lightning

June is a month containing a number of official awareness campaigns to include National Safety Month, Great Outdoors Month and Lightning Awareness Week, June 21-27. The recent news story about a local man struck by lightning has brought the dangers of summer weather to the forefront. Lightning is a source of myth and mystery, but knowing the facts about it can make summer outdoor activities safer and more enjoyable.



Summer Strikes

In a brief nine year period (2006-2014), 287 people in the United States were struck and killed by lightning. Close to two thirds of them had been enjoying outdoor leisure activities at the time of the strike. June, July and August are the peak months for lightning in the United States; of course, these are the months we are outside, on the water, in remote areas or participating in any number of outdoor sports. According to media reports about these fatal strikes, many of the victims were headed for safety or even just a few steps away from a safe location at the time of the strike. Prior planning and situational awareness are crucial to staying safe outdoors.

The Strike Zone



There are five ways lightning can strike people.



Direct Strike - These strikes occur most often when the victim is in an open area. In this case, the person is struck directly and becomes a part of the main lightning discharge channel. These are not as common as the other types of strikes, but are potentially the most deadly

Side Flash - A side flash, also known as a side splash, happens when lightning strikes a taller object that is near the victim and a part of the current jumps from the taller object to the victim. The victim is generally two to three feet from the taller object when this occurs; in most cases, the victim has taken shelter under a tree to avoid the rain or hail that is part of the storm.

Ground Current - When lightning strikes a taller object, much of the energy will travel outward from the strike in and along the ground surface. Anyone standing outside near a strike could become a victim of ground current. Due to the size of the area affected, this type of strike causes the greatest number of deaths and injuries.

Conduction - As chaotic as lightning can appear, it does like to follow a path. This channeling of energy through materials is known as conduction. Metal does not necessarily attract lightning, but it does provide a route for it to travel long distances. The majority of indoor lightning injuries and some outdoor injuries are caused by conduction. Contact with things connected to plumbing, metal surfaces or wires cause these injuries.

Streamers - A cloud-to-ground lightning strike starts within a storm as a negatively charged electrical channel called a "stepped leader". The stepped leader emerges from the bottom of the cloud and its negative charge attracts vast amounts of positive charge from the surface. The electrical channels coming up from the ground to the leader are known as streamers. A person could be a part of one of those streamers. People can be injured or killed by streamers but it is not as common as with the other types of strikes.

Not Being There

The best way to avoid lightning is to be inside a safe structure. A safe structure is one that is fully enclosed with wiring and plumbing. If that is not available, get into a hard topped metal vehicle with the windows closed. Before recreating always check the weather forecast. If storms are predicted in the area it is best to make plans to be inside and wait for the storm to pass. The weather can change rapidly in Idaho; when you are outside, watch the sky and sign up for weather alerts on your cell phone. Weather alerts are available through internet weather sites or the Idaho State Alert and Warning System (ISAWS). Got to <http://isaws.org/> to sign up for that service. If you are caught outside and cannot get to safety during a storm, you can lessen the risk by following these steps:

- ⚡ Avoid open fields and hill/ridge tops
- ⚡ Stay away from tall isolated trees or other tall objects
- ⚡ Get away from water or wet items and metal objects such as fences or poles

For more information on lightning safety go to: <http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov/index.shtml>



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