

# Navigating Future Practice: Disaster Preparedness



Disasters come in all shapes and sizes—impacting our physical spaces and the ability to care for ourselves, our families, and our patients. [The Academy's Council on Future Practice](#) urges all Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) and Nutrition Dietetic Technicians, Registered (NDTRs) to understand the significant opportunities to assume leadership roles within disaster preparedness, actively fostering a more forward-thinking culture of preparedness. This begins with knowing the right questions to ask, becoming aware of approaches in place at individual, organizational, and community-levels, and gaining a better understanding of how your role fits into current and future planning and recovery efforts.

## About this Brief

This brief offers questions to consider so you can anticipate what might be coming and get ahead of the next disaster. Quotes from RDNs and NDTRs who have recently experienced a major disaster can be found throughout the document to emphasize the role you can play in these inevitable events. With the right preparation and an active voice in conversations, RDNs and NDTRs can be better positioned as leaders in creating resilient and prepared communities, helping to ensure a coordinated and efficient response during crises, and offering a more protected future for all.

## Disasters: Sphere of Influence

Our world is increasingly unpredictable, not only due to changes in technology, information, and social systems, but also due to unpredictability in the physical world. Causes of disasters are complex and interrelated, and the cascade of effects on infrastructure, services, and overall livelihood are never isolated. There are natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods, but also human causes like poor land use planning and deforestation, population density, political instability and conflict, and industrial accidents.

### Examples of critical contributors to disasters are:

#### Climate Change

Altering weather patterns are increasing the frequency and intensity of certain types of disasters, such as hurricanes, heatwaves, and wildfires. Rising sea levels also exacerbate the impacts of storms and flooding, particularly in coastal areas. While efforts are needed to mitigate climate change, short-term approaches to adapt to changes to the environment are needed.

#### Social Determinants of Health

Poverty, inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to resources can make communities more vulnerable to disasters and shape the impact of the disasters on the community. Lack of preparedness, education, and health care infrastructure can also hinder response and recovery efforts. Recognizing and addressing these social factors is essential for promoting equitable disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. Use the [Social Vulnerability Index](#) to assess a community's susceptibility to disasters.

# Phases of Disaster Preparedness and Recovery

Across practice settings and in your homes and communities, you play a pivotal role in safeguarding individuals and families, ensuring access to adequate nutrition and food safety throughout all phases of a disaster.

*“We are going to be seeing more events like this in the future and we have to be prepared for them.”*

PHASE  
1

## Before a Disaster

- Engage in training and simulation activities to mitigate risks, minimize the impact of emergencies, and facilitate effective response and recovery.
- Identify potential risks and develop strategies to ensure continuity of nutrition care. Be proactive, and lead by example, guiding your organizations and communities in establishing robust disaster readiness plans.
- Elevate the importance of nutrition in disaster preparedness through education, collaboration, and advocacy, ensuring access to essential dietary support and resources for all.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who in your organization or community is responsible for the disaster preparedness plan? Schedule time to connect on the process of preparing and implementing the plan.
- How can you advocate for inclusion of a variety of voices from relevant departments, agencies, and audiences in planning and training activities?
- How can you facilitate clear and inclusive communication to ensure understanding of and support for the plan?
- Are you aware of the ways disasters can disrupt the regular supply chains of food and nutrition resources, affecting the ability to provide essential services?
- What role can you play in helping to ensure the readiness and resiliency of yourself and your family/workplace/community?

*“You have to be flexible, can’t always follow the “rules”... make do with what is available to you.”*

PHASE  
2

## During a Disaster

- RDNs and NDTRs need to understand the unique challenges they may face during disasters. When disaster strikes, the immediate focus shifts to the safety and well-being of individuals and communities affected. You play, as part of health care and multidisciplinary teams, a vital role in these response efforts.
- Your expertise in nutrition is critical for addressing the immediate dietary needs of those impacted, especially in environments where resources are scarce or disrupted.
- Maintain a clear and coordinated approach, so you can contribute to the overall effectiveness of the disaster response, ensuring that nutrition is not overlooked but integrated into the broader strategy.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How can you minimize the impact of disruptions to supply chains, power outages, increased demand for nutritional expertise, and staffing issues?
- How can you address staffing challenges such as remote work options and established communication channels?
- How can you help during a disaster, especially in food access and safety and with needed evacuations or shelter-in-place activities?
- How can you ensure you’re well-prepared during a potential surge in demand for nutritional guidance?
- What can you do to ensure essential functions continue when technology systems go down?

# Phases of Disaster Preparedness and Recovery

*"We couldn't wash anything - everything had to be disposable - but we also had no waste disposal for days. Until trucks from out of state could come in, we had waste that was everywhere, that festered."*

PHASE  
3

## After a Disaster

- Help lead efforts to assess the ongoing nutritional needs of affected populations and tailor recovery programs so they promote resilience and wellness. After a disaster, there are typically increased levels of morbidity and mortality, as well as the possibility of temporary or permanent relocation.
- The experiences and lessons learned by RDNs and NDTRs in the aftermath of a disaster are invaluable for refining future preparedness plans, contributing to a cycle of continuous improvement in disaster management.
- Be equipped to provide not only nutritional support but also leadership in recovery efforts. This includes collaborating with emergency response teams, participating in community outreach programs, and contributing to the rebuilding of healthy environments.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How can you support recovery efforts in your community or work, including collaboration with emergency response teams, participation in outreach programs, support for mental health and self-care, and contribution to the rebuilding of healthy environments?
- How can you ensure risks and considerations for nutrition and medical management, and other relevant needs are included into the recovery plan, ensuring the provision of necessary resources?
- What are the steps you can take to document your efforts so that you can learn from mistakes and better prepare for the future?
- What can you do to strengthen teams and partnerships for future disasters?

## Get Started:

- Adopt a forward-thinking and agile mindset, proactively anticipating and addressing nutrition-related challenges in your area of practice.
- Engage in research, scenario planning, and multidisciplinary collaboration to identify vulnerabilities, develop innovative strategies, and advocate for policies that enhance nutrition resilience.
- Lead where you are. Embrace disaster preparedness by building your skills and engaging in critical conversations to better integrate nutrition into preparedness planning.
- Visit the Academy's website to read more about resources to help you build your plans.



This is part of a series of briefs from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Council on Future Practice describing change drivers that will affect the future of the profession. This brief is intended to familiarize readers with this specific change driver and its implications, so that readers can share this knowledge with their organizations. Learn more about environmental scanning for change drivers and trends here: [here](#).