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Survive a Nuclear Blast

From Wired How-To Wiki

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A nuclear bomb's mushroom cloud. Photo: [U.S. Department of Energy](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

It may seem like a fear rooted in Cold War paranoia, but with the International Atomic Energy Agency ([IAEA](#)) sniffing around the Middle East, North Korea and other parts of the world for hidden enrichment facilities and smuggled radioactive materials, the threat of an atomic bomb hitting a major city is a harsh reality.

If your city is the target of a nuclear attack, you'll need to do more than duck and cover. Between the sheer destructive force of the blast and the horrors of fallout, the odds of survival can be depressingly slim. Here's a list of tips to beat the odds of this oft-feared doomsday scenario.

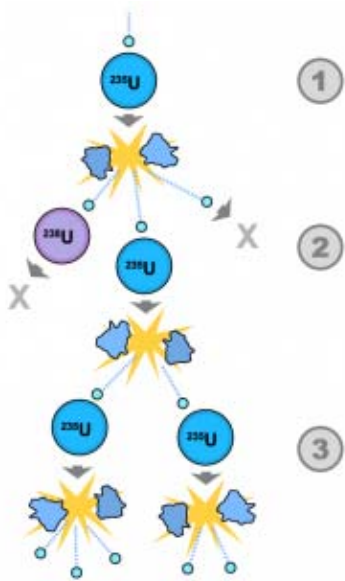
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A Primer on Nukes



A fission chain reaction. 
Image via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

First, a primer on nuclear blasts. The good news is that they share a lot of recognizable characteristics with conventional explosions. There's an initial detonation and a spherical shock wave -- so, no-brainers like putting distance between yourself and the blast obviously apply.

Here's the bad news: Nuclear blasts are exponentially more powerful than conventional explosions. In short, the detonation of radioactive material causes nuclear particles to collide at high speed starting a nuclear reaction. The result is the release of enough energy to lay waste to a metropolis faster than you can say "mutually assured destruction." At ground zero this means the horrifying image of solid materials vaporizing, and hellish fireballs hotter than the surface of the sun. Oh, and once all the irradiated dust from the blast starts to fall back to Earth (fallout), you've got hazards like radiation poisoning.

Know the Signs

In a traditional nuclear exchange warning times might be as little as three to four minutes (for the UK and Europe) or from 15-30 minutes for the U.S. and Canada.

Air raid sirens (if they still exist in your community) and public emergency systems would be put to use to notify you of an impending attack. Do not ignore these! Even if you feel your community may not be at risk in a nuclear exchange you should still find shelter as only the enemy knows all of the targets that will be hit.

In a large scale nuclear exchange the tactic of using an electro-magnetic pulse from a high-yield nuclear weapon detonated high above a target country or area would most likely be used. This would cause all sorts of electronic devices to fail from cell phones to automobiles.

If you notice that all vehicles and electronics in your immediate area have failed all at once then it is almost a sure sign that a nuclear attack is imminent.

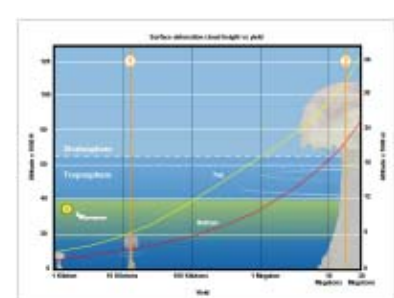
On the other hand, nuclear attack from a terrorist might come with little to no warning, in which case you must know what to do immediately.

In either case the following steps do apply.

Step 1: Don't Look at the Flash

It's tempting -- I know. However, watching the flash from a nuclear explosion is nothing like rubbernecking a traffic accident. The resulting burst of light is several times brighter than the sun. Witnessing this level of brilliance can produce temporary blindness for the lucky, and permanent loss of sight for the truly curious. The best course of action? Look away from the flash and put a barrier over your eyes. Keeping your eyesight is paramount -- you'll need it for all of the remaining steps.

Step 2: Find Cover From the Blast



The blast cloud from a 50-megaton bomb, shown at right, reaches into the stratosphere

The seconds following the initial flash are critical. Luckily, factors like explosive yield, weather, and distance can lessen the effects of the shock wave -- but don't kid yourself, it's coming. The best method for weathering this stage is finding an ideal barrier between yourself and the combination of extreme pressure, heat, thermal radiation and 500mph winds headed your way. This is where survival gets a little tricky.

Given the number of variables present in a city setting, there's no surefire way to avoid this wall of death (save for getting underground). However, hunkering down in a blast resistant or brick building and staying away from windows can help your odds. Likewise, in a high rise or apartment setting, you'll want to make your way above the first few floors and get low somewhere in the middle of the building.

If you are unable to find any of these shelters fast enough then stay as low to the ground as possible. Hunkering or laying behind the curb of a sidewalk or other small impediment facing the blast is better than taking the brunt of it standing as the pressure wave can cause massive internal damage.

Most deaths from a nuclear explosion are attributed to flying debris, mainly glass. Just like in an earthquake try to keep your vital organs and head covered with your arms.

Step 3: Assess the Landscape

Look for escape routes or potential ad-hoc fallout shelters. With the majority of the blast damage done, another pressing issue lies ahead -- radiation exposure. Fallout is typically at its worst shortly after the blast, so time is of the essence. Depending on the magnitude of the explosion, it can last as long as three weeks, but variables like wind speed, terrain and weather can change this.

Topside Survivors

Survivors caught topside during the blast are in an especially precarious situation. Everything from clothing to hair is likely

contaminated and prolonged exposure to this environment can result in acute radiation sickness and eventually death. The primary goal should be assessing the landscape and either heading underground, or fleeing the area. In general, any area that's downwind of the blast or rife with heavy crosswinds should be avoided during evacuation. Open areas at a lower elevation than the blast site should also be avoided, as they become hotbeds for settling radioactive material.

Underground Survivors

If fleeing the initial blast took you underground to a basement or subway tunnel, then you're most likely ahead of the game. Since the Earth insulates the majority of topside radiation, the next priority should be finding food, water and sealing any access points that might let in falling radioactive debris. Also, it's advisable to mark the outside of the entryway to let disaster workers know that you're inside.

Step 4: Decontaminate

Finding a fallout-safe location is only half the battle. The other half is keeping your refuge radiation-free. Anything that was outdoors during the blast (including people) has likely been contaminated. As such, survivors should undergo a quick and dirty decontamination process before entering shelter. A thorough rubdown with soap and water should do the trick for skin and hair, and a vigorous brushing of clothing should help. It sounds trite, but it helps. Just make sure not to go nuts with the scrubbing -- an open wound is begging for internal contamination.

Step 5: Wait for Rescue

Given the extreme rarity of nuclear explosions in urban areas, it's likely that *somebody* is on the way to help (barring any doomsday scenarios). However, the obvious dangers of fallout should prevent you from aimlessly wandering the landscape and yelling for help. If you're lucky enough to have escaped with a radio or cell phone, give it a shot. It will most likely work. Unlike Hollywood nuclear explosions, electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) only happens when high-yield nuclear weapons are detonated in the upper atmosphere.

Do not leave until rescue teams have given the all clear. If the attack occurs due to a nuclear conflict there might be multiple attacks on the same target area or surrounding targets. Military bases, airports, industrial centers, power plants, and ports all could be potential targets as well as the city they surround.

Tip: No matter what, always remember -- *dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot* is Morse code for "S.O.S."

Further Reading

- Estimate your chances with the [Nuclear Weapon Effects Calculator](#)
- Cresson H. Kearny's [Nuclear War Survival Skills](#) is an excellent resource.

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