

NWA Lightning Safety Policy Statement

According to statistics compiled by the National Weather Service over a ten-year period, on average, twenty-seven (27) people are killed by lightning each year, and hundreds more are injured. With proper precautions, most of those occurrences could have been prevented.

As an organization, the National Weather Association is dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in weather forecasting, communication, and service. The ultimate goal of any forecaster (and “our members”) is to save lives and property through a combination of educational outreach, accurate forecasts, and timely warnings. When it comes to lightning, the educational outreach component is especially important, since real-time forecasts and warnings on the scale of time at which lightning occurs is rare and not widely available to the general public. As such, the National Weather Association would like to recommend actions that will keep people safe from lightning.

The first recommendation is to have a plan for times when lightning is in or near your area. This is especially important for outdoor activities, as there is no safe place outdoors if thunderstorms are nearby. If outdoors, head into a building or other enclosed structure, such as an enclosed vehicle with a hard roof. Avoid being near tall objects such as trees since lightning is more likely to strike the highest object in an area – this includes you if you are the highest object in the area! Also avoid swimming pools or other bodies of water since water can conduct electricity.

It is much safer to be indoors when thunderstorms are close by. However, if indoors, remember that the wiring and plumbing systems of a home or building can conduct electric current if struck, so avoid contact with anything plugged in to an electrical outlet or any faucet. It is also a good idea to stay away from any doors or windows.

Once you have a plan, the next step is knowing when to implement the plan. Situational awareness of the forecast from your preferred weather source will give you a general indication of when and where thunderstorms are likely to occur. Lightning may strike ten miles or more from a thunderstorm in any direction – including when the thunderstorm is heading away from you!

A general rule to follow is that if you are able to hear thunder, you are close enough to be struck. Keep in mind that buildings, topography, or other noise may hinder this ability. Remember, the popular slogans “When Thunder Roars, Go Indoors!” and “See a Flash, Dash Inside!”

An option that does not depend on sight or sound is the use of an application on mobile devices, typically provided by a local TV station, or other reliable weather source. These applications may have the ability to alert you and/or show your proximity to lightning.

It is generally safe to return to outdoor activities when 30 minutes or more have passed since the last sound of thunder or since lightning was last seen.

Knowing the dangers of lightning, having a plan, and deciding when to implement that plan are the best ways to minimize your chances of being struck by lightning. We encourage everyone to follow these guidelines!