

Severe Weather Awareness Week – Tuesday: Weather Warnings

RUN TIME: 4 MIN 38 SECONDS

Lucinda Robertson, Public Information Officer

Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division

Aubry Wilkins, General Forecaster

National Weather Service (Des Moines)

LUCINDA: I'm Lucinda Robertson, a public information officer with Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

AUBRY: I'm Aubry Wilkins, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service office in Des Moines.

LUCINDA: As part of Severe Weather Awareness Week, we're talking today about weather warnings. Aubry, what's the difference between a watch and a warning?

AUBRY: That's an excellent question, and sometimes people get confused on this. A watch is when conditions are favorable for a severe weather hazard to take place, such as a flash flood watch, a tornado watch, or a severe thunderstorm watch. It means we have looked at things and we feel that perhaps later on – in the next couple hours or so – these hazardous conditions could develop. Whereas a warning means that these conditions are either imminent or ongoing. Such as a severe thunderstorm warning means that there is a severe thunderstorm, and a tornado warning means that there either is a tornado or a tornado is imminent.

LUCINDA: How do people get watches or warnings?

AUBRY: There are a variety of ways to get watches or warnings, and the main way to get a watch or warning is to remain "weather aware." You have to be actively seeking warnings and watches often. A great way to receive watches and warnings is through the NOAA Weather Radio; and when we issue a watch or warning in Des Moines it will automatically be sent out on the NOAA Weather Radio and it will alarm for you and your county.

Another way is through broadcast media – whether it be radio or TV. There are also a lot of, uh, new technologies such as cell phones and the Internet. A lot of people nowadays have smartphones, and there are a variety of apps you can download that help you get warnings and there's a wide variety – there isn't one from the National Weather Service but there are several out there that you can choose from. Take your pick as to what you want to be warned for. And also on the Internet, the National Weather Service's website at weather dot gov will have all the up-to-date information on watches and warnings as well.

LUCINDA: And I'm sure there are a variety of products out there through the various social media outlets.

AUBRY: Social media is also becoming an active way to receive warnings. A lot of people will "Twitter" them or post them once they receive them. Some organizations that you can follow will "retweet" things. Also Facebook – sometimes people will update on Facebook.

LUCINDA: And it's important, of course, for people to get their information from official sources to make sure they're getting the most accurate, and up-to-date information.

AUBRY: Absolutely. And of course we recommend the National Weather Service since we are the ones issuing the warnings and anything else is kind of "hearsay" from us. But there are official channels to get

our warnings and the Emergency Alert System is what we use to send out and that will scroll across TVs and a lot of web pages will also pick up that scroll.

LUCINDA: I would guess another valuable way that people learn about weather warnings is from their family and friends.

AUBRY: Absolutely, that is a wonderful point and one that sometimes people don't often think about is if you are sitting at home or out and about and you hear about a severe thunderstorm warning or a tornado warning or even a flash flood warning for that matter and it's not for your area, but you know people in that area – pick up the phone and call those people, or send them a text message and tell them, "Hey, did you know this was happening for your area right now?" And that has been really, really proven to get people to take action to protect their lives.

LUCINDA: And that's an important tool because everyone is so busy. They are taking their children to their activities, and they're working, and, and they may not always have access to weather warnings.

AUBRY: Absolutely. They might not have heard about it, or perhaps they saw it and thought, "Oh, it's okay, I have some time," or, "I'm going to do something else." But then actually getting a call from someone that they know instead of hearing it on the radio, or from the newscaster on TV really, really sparks them to action, to personalize the threat.

LUCINDA: In the past couple of years, some jurisdictions have been sounding their warning sirens when winds reach 70 miles per hour. Something that's important for citizens to do is to check with their county emergency management agency to find out about the policy for where they live. Can you give us some insight as to the kind of hazards that high winds can pose?

AUBRY: Absolutely. Outdoor warning sirens are a way that a lot of people kind of rely on and assume they're going to hear the sirens and know there's a watch or warning in effect. However, that is not a very reliable source. The outdoor warning systems are just that – they're for people who are outdoors to go inside and seek more information. If it's the middle of the night, you might not hear it, you might not get woken up if there's a storm and there's rain and there's wind – again, you might not hear the sirens.

Different counties and even different cities have different policies on whether they sound their sirens or not. Some will sound their sirens for severe thunderstorms with winds 65, 70 miles an hour. Some will only sound them based on confirmed sightings of tornadoes. So it's very important that you check with your local community or your county to determine what their policy is when they sound sirens – that you're a little bit more informed about what the sirens mean in your area.

LUCINDA: So this is an opportunity for people to talk with their local emergency management officials so that they are prepared when severe weather actually does occur here in Iowa.

AUBRY: Absolutely.