

Severe Weather Awareness Week – Thursday: Severe Thunderstorms

RUN TIME: 4 MIN 29 SECONDS

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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: Well, our topic today, for Thursday of Severe Weather Awareness Week, is severe thunderstorms. And, if you live in Iowa you know that we have quite a few thunderstorms every year. Aubry, by definition, what is a severe thunderstorm?

AUBRY: A severe thunderstorm must contain hail that is one inch in diameter or larger, or winds that are 58 miles per hour or stronger, or a tornado, will be classified as a severe thunderstorm.

LUCINDA: What can people do before a storm? It's very important to be prepared for any kind of weather hazard. What are some things that you recommend people do?

AUBRY: Well, the first thing that people can do is to remain "weather aware" throughout the day, especially in the spring and summer when thunderstorms are favored in Iowa – especially severe thunderstorms. And to take a look before you're headed out for the day and see if there is a threat. Any thunderstorm, really, is a potentially life-threatening situation with lightning. Hail and winds on top of that are an even greater threat. So if you do see that there is a threat for severe thunderstorms, or even thunderstorms later in the day, maybe plan your day accordingly so that you can be home, or at the very least, keep a radio on or a NOAA Weather Radio handy. Perhaps if you have an outdoor event scheduled, reschedule it for the next day if the next day looks to be calm.

Also around your house, some things you can do to help protect yourself is to, in the beginning of the springtime, get out there and maybe trim some low-hanging branches that look to be loose. Or, just take a look around – secure things. Things can blow around pretty easily in the strong winds such as patio furniture and that kind of stuff.

LUCINDA: Okay, so, we're being proactive and we have our NOAA Weather Radio on, or are watching TV and it's saying that thunderstorms are approaching. And I think sometimes we have a tendency to think, "Oh, it's just a thunderstorm." But actually, thunderstorms spawn something more severe – or they can.

AUBRY: And in Iowa thunderstorms are so common we tend to almost tune them out sometimes. [You may think], "Oh, it's another thunderstorm," in the middle of the night. But again, lightning is an incredibly dangerous threat that accompanies any thunderstorm. And if you're close enough to hear the thunder, then you're close enough to be struck by lightning. And being struck by lightning obviously, can be fatal and it can have lifelong consequences if you survive.

Like I said, if you're close enough to hear thunder, you're close enough to be struck by lightning. What we like to say is, "If thunder roars, go indoors." And remain there until after the storms have passed. And again, until you've quit hearing thunder. Just because the main storm has passed – even though the storm has passed – you could still be at threat for [being struck by] lightning. A shelter that would be good for lightning is a building, a house, something like that. A car is also a good shelter. A convertible won't

protect you but a hard-top car will. And as far as a building goes, the general rule of thumb to find a safe building is one with four walls and plumbing. A gazebo or a tent are not gonna protect you from the threats of lightning.

LUCINDA: What if you're on the water? In Iowa, summertime, people are out boating, out enjoying the outdoors. What are the things that you should do?

AUBRY: You should definitely keep a radio – especially a NOAA Weather Radio – with you at all times so that you'll get advance notice. That will hopefully give you enough time to get off the water. If you're on the water and you hear thunder, head for shore. It's a good idea to get in your car to seek shelter.

LUCINDA: Is it a myth that you should stay off the phone or not use appliances during a thunderstorm? I've heard it both ways.

AUBRY: What can happen is lightning doesn't have to strike your house but it can strike nearby and travel down the power lines and into your house. So you still are at risk if you are using corded electronics. Nowadays people have cell phones and those aren't necessarily such a huge risk but a corded phone is, or even a computer if it's plugged in to an outlet that can receive an electrical charge.

Also, the same goes for plumbing. It doesn't have to strike your house, but it can travel down plumbing lines so by all means, please do not take a shower or get in the bathtub because we all know that electricity and water are not a good combination.

LUCINDA: In 2011, we heard a lot about the flooding along the Missouri River. But we had some pretty bad thunderstorms as well.

AUBRY: That's correct. Iowa had a very severe event that happened July 11th of 2011, and it happened in the overnight hours. And it didn't have any tornadoes with it but we did see some pretty extreme damage with straight-line winds associated with a thunderstorm. We called the system a "duratio." And that duratio produced 100-mile-an-hour winds, and those winds caused damage very equivocal to a tornado where people's homes were destroyed with roofs coming off, and trees falling on houses, and those things.

LUCINDA: In fact, the damage was so severe that Iowa received a Presidential Disaster Declaration for that storm.

AUBRY: And that's something a lot of people don't think about with severe thunderstorms but they can be very dangerous.