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Seek safe shelter during lightning strikes

Lightning Safety Week is June 21-27 and Sarasota County Emergency Management Chief Ed McCrane urges residents and visitors to become educated and informed about lightning safety. Hazardous weather in Florida is often associated with hurricanes and tornados, but lightning strikes are responsible for more weather-related deaths than all other weather hazards combined.

The Fourth of July is traditionally one of the most deadly times of the year for lightning-related injuries. All thunderstorms produce lightning, however, it doesn't have to be raining for lightning to strike. Lightning can strike 10 miles from any rainfall. If people hear thunder, they are in danger of being struck by lightning and should seek safe shelter immediately.

"Most of the time people are injured or killed because they either didn't know the facts about lightning or they decided it won't happen to them," said McCrane. "Florida is the lightning capital of the United States so we want people to be aware of their surroundings and go indoors when they hear thunder."

The most dangerous place to be during a thunderstorm is in an open area. Trees offer shelter from rain, but they provide no protection from lightning. During a thunderstorm, the safest place to be is in a substantial building, such as a home, away from windows. Vehicles with metal roofs also provide safe shelter from lightning.

For lightning flashes, use the "30/30" rule. First, get indoors, then, count the seconds between a lightning flash and the sound of thunder. If it's less than 30 seconds, remain inside for at least 30 minutes after the thunder stops. Many lightning strike victims incorrectly assume that the threat has passed once a thunderstorm's rains end.

Additional helpful tips include:

- Take a portable NOAA all-hazards radio to outdoor events.
- Avoid contact with corded phones and electrical equipment.
- Avoid contact with plumbing. Don't wash your hands, take a shower, wash dishes or do laundry.
- Stay away from windows and doors, and stay off porches.
- Don't lie on concrete floors or lean against concrete walls.

Lightning strikes can cause cardiac arrest, burns and nerve damage. If a person is struck by lightning, call 911 immediately and begin CPR if the person is unconscious. Bystanders aren't in danger from initiating medical aid because victims don't have an electrical charge. Many deaths can be prevented if a victim receives proper, immediate first aid.

For more information on how you can plan for a disaster, visit the All Hazards Web site at www.scgov.net or to learn more about lightning safety <http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov/index.htm>.

Follow the latest Emergency Management information on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/scgoveoc>.

For additional information, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask about lightning safety.

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