

Sheltering skills are like first aid basics: keep them fresh so they can save a life when needed

What do sheltering skills and first aid basics have in common? The principle is the same in both cases: once learned, they become part of your muscle memory. We hope we will never need either of them, but if the situation does arise, time is precious, seconds matter, and the difference between life and death may depend on taking the right action. That is why both skills need to be refreshed, revisited and practised from time to time.

In Estonia, testing of the siren network has become routine over the past few years. Three times a year, sirens sound across the country and warning SMS messages and app notifications are sent to the population. Each test is preceded by a broader public information campaign to ensure that it does not come as a surprise.

Studies show that people are generally quite familiar with the public warning system and that sirens are the first thing that comes to mind when people think about emergency alerts.

What is discussed somewhat less often, however, is what to do when the siren sounds and, more importantly, what to do if it sounds outside a scheduled test. A routine test may seem like something that no longer deserves much attention. However, that feeling can be misleading and should not give us false sense of security. Skills remain sharp only when they are practised from time to time.

Just as we occasionally check the contents of our first aid kit and remind ourselves how to stop severe bleeding or perform CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), we should also revisit the skills needed when sirens are activated. There is nothing complicated about it and the basic principles are straightforward.

Remember that when sirens sound, the message is simple: take shelter immediately.

If you are in a building that has a designated sheltering area, go there without delay. Sheltering locations (and, in the future, purpose-built shelters) are marked with a blue triangle on an orange background. If this is not possible, move to the nearest indoor space on the lowest floor available. When sheltering, follow the two-wall rule: ensure that there are at least two solid walls between you and the outside environment. Stay away from large glass surfaces, doors and windows, and, where possible, choose a lower floor of the building.

If you are outdoors, move quickly to the nearest indoor location. If this is not possible, lie down and protect your head and neck with your hands or a soft object. Remain in your sheltering location until official channels inform you that the danger has passed.

It is worth reviewing both your home and workplace with sheltering in mind so that you already know where to go if the need arises. Ask your employer or, if you live in an apartment building, your residents' association whether the building has a sheltering plan in place or currently being developed.

It is also important to discuss sheltering and the reasons for maintaining these skills with your family and loved ones. The better informed we are, the more calmly and effectively we can face potential dangers.

October is Civil Protection Month in Estonia, making it an ideal time to refresh and practise sheltering skills. On October 14, from 3.00 pm to 3.10 pm, the Estonian Rescue Services Agency, together with its partners, will test the nationwide public warning system EE-ALARM, and sirens will be activated in larger towns and cities across the country.

Before the sirens sound, an SMS message will be sent to mobile phones. The Eesti app and the "Ole valmis!" app will also notify users of the test, and information will be shared through Estonia's public broadcaster, ERR.

When the test takes place, it is worth walking through, or at least considering, where and how you would take shelter in the location where you happen to be at that moment. By doing so, you help keep your sheltering skills fresh and ensure that you know how to act safely in a real emergency.

Learn more about sheltering at olevalmis.ee.