

News FLASH



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Lightning kills

More people are hurt by lightning than tornadoes or hurricanes.

Lightning is an underrated hazard, killing more people in the United States than any other weather event except flooding. Yet some people don't take the danger seriously.

Lightning strikes an average of 400 people every year, killing about 80, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Weather Service.

Why is the threat of lightning so easy to ignore? Because it's so common, explains Stephan Kuhl, National Warning Coordination Meteorologist at the National Weather Services headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"Lightning accompanies every thunderstorm," Kuhl notes, "and there are an average of 100,000 thunderstorms in the

United States every year." An estimated 25 million cloud-to-ground lightning strikes occur in the United States each year.

Worse than tornadoes

Tornadoes and hurricanes usually devastate a wider area. Unless you're near a lightning strike, the effect may go unnoticed.

However, if you're near a lightning strike, it's impossible not to notice. Lightning can heat the air to 50,000 degrees, five times hotter than the surface of the sun. The rapid heating and cooling of the air near the lightning channel causes a shock wave that produces thunder. One ground stroke can generate between 100 million and 1 billion volts of electricity: That's enough to keep a 100-watt bulb lit for three months.

"If you see lightning and hear thunder, you should immediately postpone any outdoor activities," Kuhl says.

Play it safe

While nothing offers absolute safety from lightning, following some simple rules can improve your odds (see accompanying list). The best guideline is the 30/30 rule. If you see lightning, count how many seconds before you hear the thunder. If it's less than 30 seconds, take cover. Once indoors, wait 30 minutes after the last peal of thunder before venturing back out.

"If possible, get inside a closed building," Kuhl suggests. If a storm is approaching, avoid being in or near high places, open fields, isolated trees, unprotected gazebos, rain or picnic shelters, baseball dugouts, communications towers, flagpoles, light poles, bleachers (metal or wood), metal fences, convertibles, golf carts and water.

Enclosed metal vehicles, with the windows rolled up, provide relatively good shelter from lightning.

"Keep an eye to the sky," Kuhl urges. "If you hear thunder, it's time to head indoors."

Ninety percent of lightning victims survive, especially with timely medical treatment. People struck by lightning do not carry a charge. It is safe to touch them and provide medical treatment. Call 911 and start mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. If the victim has no pulse, begin cardiac compressions. ■

Lightning safety rules

If you can hear thunder, you are close enough to the storm to be struck by lightning. Some advice:

- Listen to the weather forecast on NOAA Weather Radio or your local media. Watch for increasing wind, flashes of lightning, thunder, darkening skies and static on an AM radio.
- Avoid being the tallest object.
- Don't stand under or near an isolated tree or small group of trees.
- Get inside a sturdy structure before the storm approaches.
- Unplug all unnecessary appliances.
- Don't use the telephone during a storm unless it's an emergency.
- Don't stand by open windows, doors or patios during a thunderstorm.
- Get out of boats and away from water.
- If a sturdy shelter is not available, get inside a hard-topped automobile and keep the windows up.
- Don't take a bath or shower during a storm.
- If you feel your skin tingle or your hair stands on end, squat low to the ground on the balls of your feet. Place your hands on your knees with your head between them. Make yourself the smallest target possible and minimize your contact with the ground — do not lay flat on the ground. ■

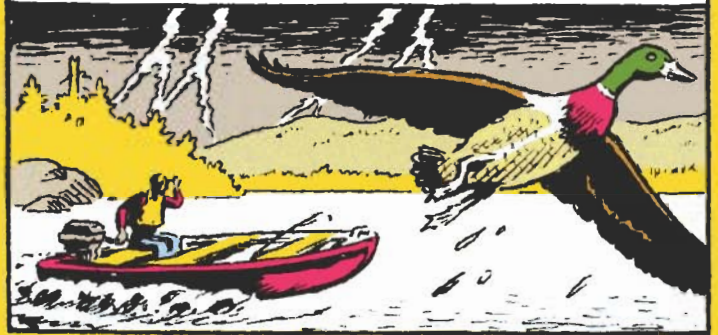
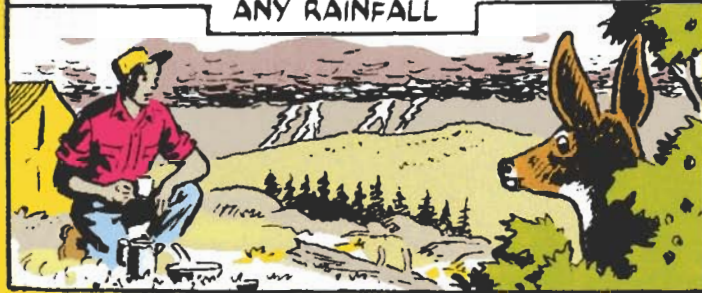
MARK TRAIL

NEARLY 1,800 THUNDERSTORMS OCCUR AT ANY MOMENT AROUND THE WORLD...OF THE ESTIMATED 100,000 THUNDERSTORMS THAT OCCUR EACH YEAR IN THE U.S., ONLY ABOUT 10 PERCENT ARE CLASSIFIED AS SERIOUS

WHATEVER THEIR SIZE, ALL THUNDERSTORMS ARE DANGEROUS

LIGHTNING MYTHS AND FACTS...MYTH: IF IT IS NOT RAINING, THERE IS NO DANGER FROM LIGHTNING...**FACT:** LIGHTNING MAY OCCUR AS FAR AWAY AS 10 MILES FROM ANY RAINFALL

MYTH: RUBBER SOLES OF SHOES OR RUBBER TIRES ON A CAR CAN PROTECT YOU...**FACT:** THEY PROVIDE **NO** PROTECTION...



HOWEVER, YOU ARE MUCH SAFER IN A VEHICLE THAN OUTSIDE... IT ADDS INCREASED PROTECTION AS LONG AS YOU AREN'T TOUCHING METAL

MYTH: PEOPLE STRUCK BY LIGHTNING CARRY AN ELECTRICAL CHARGE AND SHOULDN'T BE TOUCHED...**FACT:** LIGHTNING VICTIMS CARRY NO CHARGE AND SHOULD BE ATTENDED TO IMMEDIATELY

FACT: WHAT IS REFERRED TO AS HEAT LIGHTNING IS ACTUALLY LIGHTNING TOO FAR AWAY FOR THUNDER TO BE HEARD- BUT IT MAY BE MOVING IN YOUR DIRECTION

MYTH: "HEAT LIGHTNING" OCCURS AFTER A HOT SUMMER DAY AND POSES NO THREAT

JACK ELROD

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