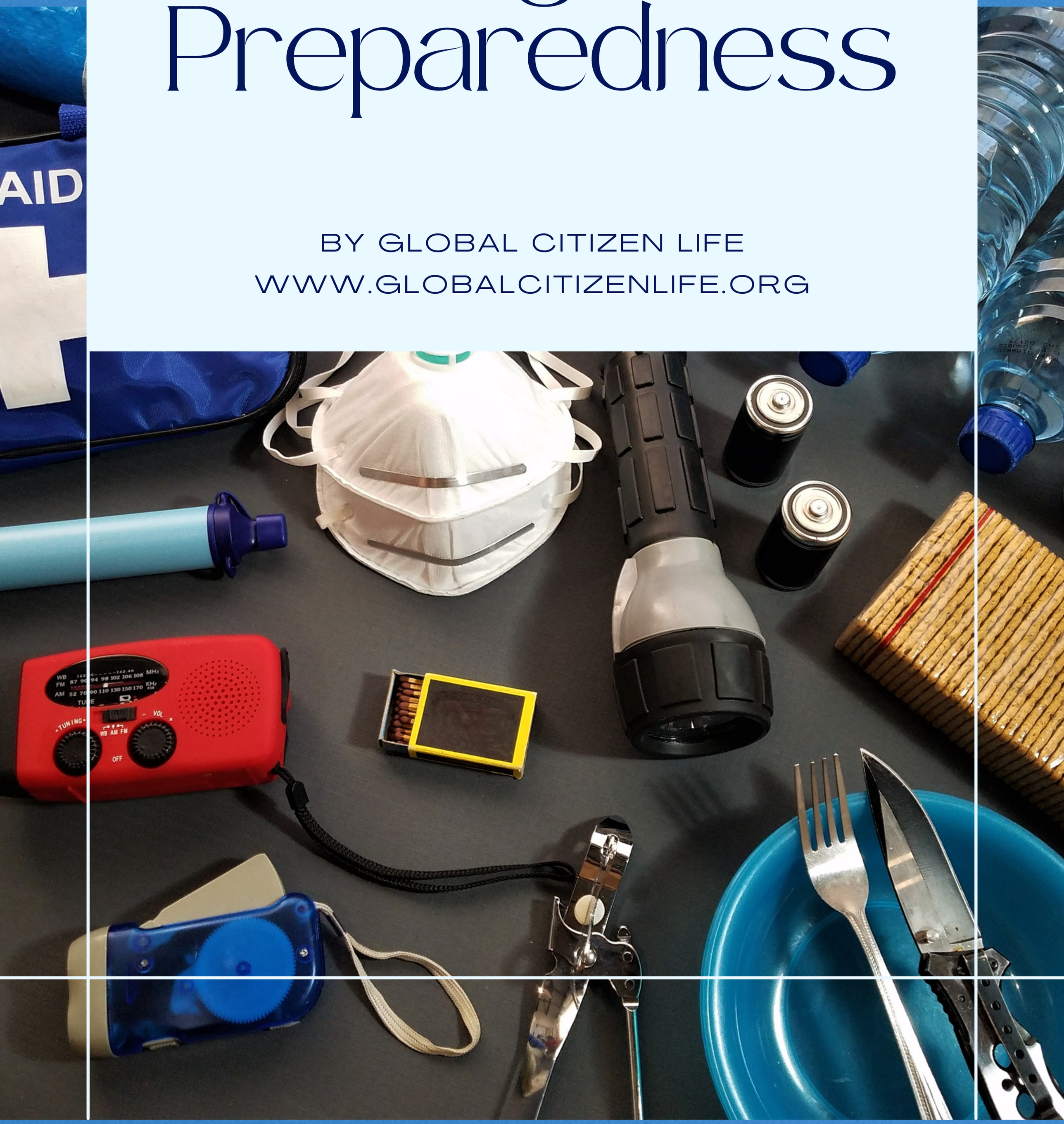
Emergency Preparedness

BY GLOBAL CITIZEN LIFE

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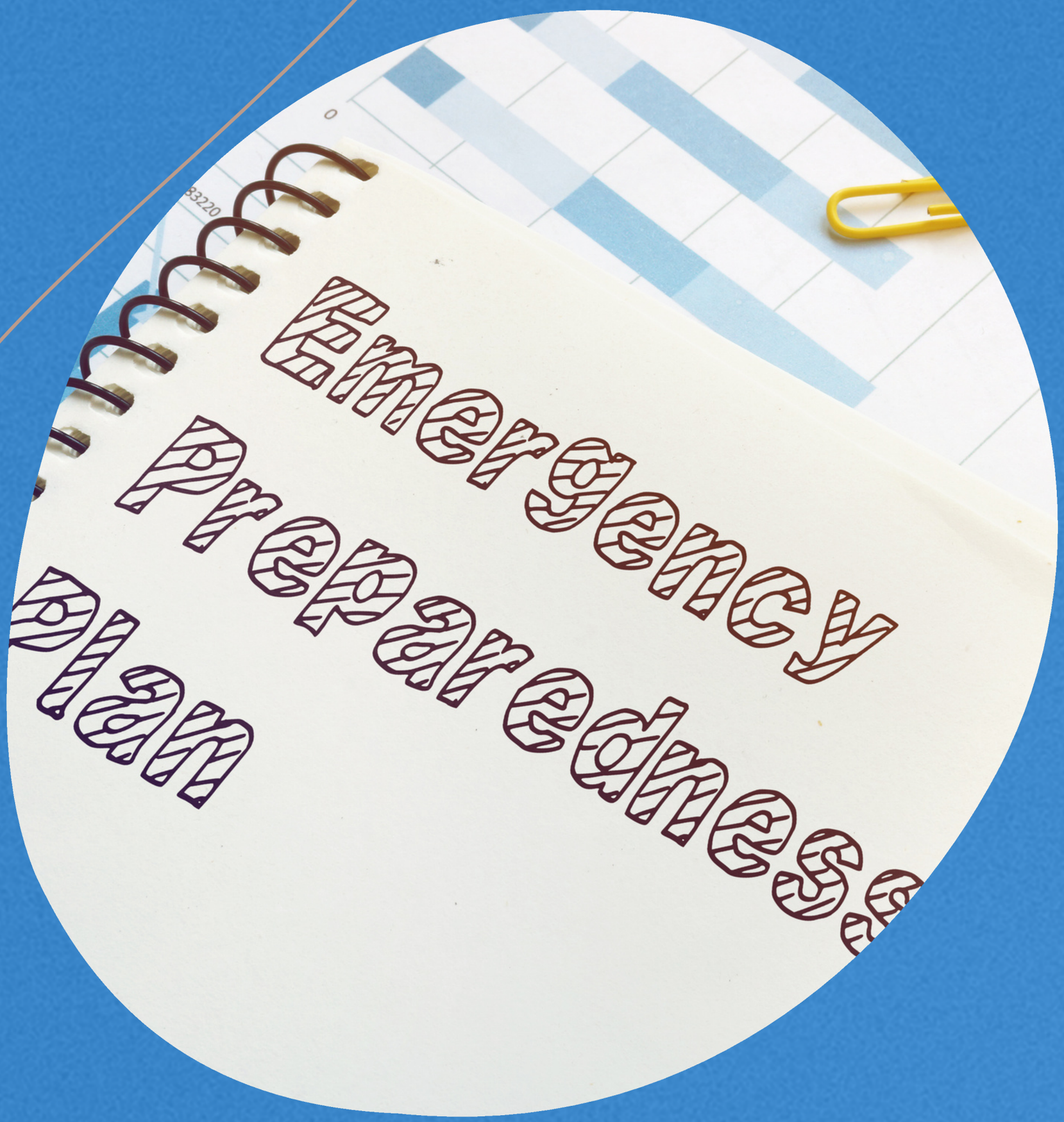
Protecting Yourself and Your Loved Ones While Living Abroad

While moving to France offers adventure, opportunity, and a fresh start, it's important to remember that life, anywhere in the world, can be unpredictable. From health crises to natural disasters, power outages to regional strikes, emergencies do happen. Preparing in advance can significantly reduce your stress, safeguard your family, and ensure you can respond quickly and effectively when something goes wrong.

This module is designed to help you build a robust emergency preparedness plan tailored to expat life in France. It will walk you through essential contacts, localized risks (such as wildfires or floods), handling healthcare emergencies, and practical steps for securing your home and daily life. You'll also learn what to include in an emergency supply kit, how to create family-specific response plans, and where to get timely and accurate information when it matters most.

While France is a highly developed and safe country, unfamiliar systems and language barriers can slow down your response time if you're not prepared. Think of this module as your peace-of-mind insurance policy, because the best time to prepare for an emergency is before one happens.





EMERGENCY CONTACTS AND COMMUNICATION

How to Stay Connected and Reach Help Quickly in Times of Crisis

One of the most important aspects of being prepared as an expat is having an effective communication plan and access to critical contact information. In an emergency, you don't want to waste time searching for phone numbers, addresses, or embassy contacts; you need to act quickly and confidently. That's why setting up your emergency communication strategy before you need it is essential.

Key Emergency Numbers in France

France has a centralized emergency response system. Here are the main numbers you should memorize and/or store in your phone:

- 112 – The universal emergency number in the EU. Works for police, fire, or medical assistance.
- 15 – SAMU (medical emergency services)
- 17 – Police (for crime or safety-related emergencies)
- 18 – Fire Brigade (also handles traffic accidents and rescue)
- 114 – Emergency number for people with hearing/speech impairments (text message or fax)

🔐 These numbers are accessible from landlines and mobile phones, even if your phone is locked or has no SIM card.

Embassy and Consulate Contacts

If you are a citizen of another country living in France, your embassy or nearest consulate can be a vital resource during a personal or national emergency.

Locate and save the following:

- Main embassy address and phone number
- Local consulate contact for your region
- Emergency contact numbers for after-hours situations
- Registration programs like:
  - STEP (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) for U.S. citizens
  - ROCA (Registration of Canadians Abroad) for Canadians

Registering with your embassy not only allows them to contact you in a crisis (like a natural disaster or civil unrest) but also makes it easier to replace lost passports or access support services.

Local Contacts and Service Providers

Create a printed and digital list of the following for your household:

- Your local médecin traitant (primary care doctor)
- Nearest hospital or urgent care center
- 24-hour pharmacy
- Veterinarian (if you have pets)
- Local electric/gas utility providers
- Your building superintendent or landlord (in case of issues like gas leaks or water damage)

Keep this list:

- Near your phone or posted on your refrigerator
- In your emergency kit
- On your smartphone and shared cloud folder (with family members)

Communication Plan With Family & Friends

In a crisis, standard communication systems may be overloaded or temporarily disrupted. Create a communication strategy with family members that includes:

- A primary contact person outside of your household who can help coordinate communication (ideally outside of the affected area)
- A designated meeting place near your home and an alternative one further away
- Group chat apps like WhatsApp or Signal, which use data instead of cell towers, may be more reliable during an outage.
- A list of critical phrases in French (e.g., "I need help," "Where is the hospital?") is saved to your phone and printed for non-French speakers.

Being prepared doesn't mean living in fear; it means empowering yourself to respond effectively. With these communication tools and contact lists in place, you'll be able to stay calm and act swiftly during any emergency situation in France.



NATURAL DISASTER AWARENESS AND RESPONSE

Understanding Regional Risks in France and How to Stay Safe

France is a relatively safe country when it comes to natural disasters, but like all countries, it is not immune to extreme weather events or environmental hazards. As an expat, it's critical to be informed about the specific risks in your region and know exactly what to do if disaster strikes, especially since instructions may be issued in French and local protocols can differ from those in your home country.

Natural Disasters You May Encounter in France

The most common environmental hazards in France include:

1. Flooding (Inondations): Floods are the most frequent and widespread natural hazard in France, particularly in river valleys like the Seine (Paris), Rhône (Lyon), and Garonne (Bordeaux). Coastal flooding can also occur along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts during storms.
2. Wildfires (Incendies de forêt): The south of France, including Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Corsica, faces wildfire risks during the dry summer months. These fires can spread quickly in rural and wooded areas and may lead to evacuations.
3. Storms and High Winds (Tempêtes): Atlantic-facing regions such as Brittany and Normandy are exposed to strong winds and winter storms. These can cause power outages, transportation disruptions, and property damage.
4. Heatwaves (Canicules): France regularly experiences deadly summer heatwaves. Urban areas like Paris, Lyon, and Toulouse can become "urban heat islands" with temperatures exceeding 40°C (104°F). Elderly individuals and children are especially vulnerable.
5. Earthquakes (Tremblements de terre): While rare, mild to moderate earthquakes can occur in the Alps, Pyrenees, and southeastern France. The risk is higher in Nice, Grenoble, and areas near the Italian border.
6. Avalanches (Avalanches): If you're living in or visiting alpine regions such as Chamonix or Annecy during winter, avalanches are a seasonal risk. Always check local warnings when skiing or hiking in high elevations.

How to Prepare for and Respond to Natural Disasters

1. Know Your Local Risks: Every department (administrative region) in France has its own Plan Communal de Sauvegarde (PCS)—a municipal safety plan for managing local emergencies. You can ask your local mairie (town hall) for a copy or access it on the municipality's website.

2. Register for Alerts: Subscribe to FR-Alert, France's national public warning system that sends geo-targeted emergency notifications to your mobile phone—without needing to install an app. These alerts are issued for major disasters, terrorist events, and urgent evacuations.

Additionally, check Vigicrues.gouv.fr (for flood alerts) and Météo-France.com for weather warnings.

3. Prepare an Evacuation Plan: In case of evacuation:
   - Know at least two exit routes from your home
   - Have your emergency bag packed and ready
   - Keep your documents in a waterproof folder
   - If you have a car, ensure it's fueled and in working order

4. Stay Informed During the Crisis: Listen to France Info (FM 105.5) or local news stations for updates
   - Follow local Préfecture and fire service social media accounts
   - Use translation tools or bilingual neighbors to help if you're unsure of French instructions

5. Heed Evacuation Orders Immediately: If authorities recommend evacuation, follow the instructions without delay. Don't assume you can wait it out—floods and fires can accelerate rapidly.

What Expats Often Overlook

- Language barriers can slow response times—know key terms like "évacuation," "urgence," and "abri" (shelter).
- Many renters don't ask their landlords if the property is located in a risk zone (Zone inondable or Zone à risques).
- Pets must be included in your evacuation plan—prepare carriers, leashes, and travel documents ahead of time.

Natural disasters in France may be less severe or frequent than in other parts of the world, but when they do occur, they demand a well-thought-out response. Being aware of regional risks, subscribing to alerts, and preparing to act quickly could make all the difference for you and your family.



HEALTHCARE EMERGENCIES

How to Get Urgent Medical Help in France—What Expats Need to Know

Facing a medical emergency is stressful in any country. Still, as an expat in France, possibly unfamiliar with the language, healthcare system, or who to contact, it can be especially overwhelming. The good news is that France has one of the most advanced and responsive healthcare systems in the world. However, knowing how the system works, who to call, and where to go is critical for a fast and effective response when every minute counts.

What to Do in a Medical Emergency

If you or someone nearby is experiencing a serious medical emergency, such as chest pain, difficulty breathing, stroke symptoms, or severe injury, take the following steps:

1. **Call 15** – This connects you to SAMU (Service d'Aide Médicale Urgente), the French emergency medical service.
    - Operators usually speak basic English, especially in larger cities.
    - A doctor will triage your call and decide whether to dispatch an ambulance (ambulance SMUR), advise home care, or direct you to the nearest hospital.
2. **Call 112** – The pan-European emergency number is another option, especially from a mobile phone. It works across the EU and is ideal if you're unsure which number to use.
3. **Don't Go to the ER Unless Necessary** – Unlike in some countries, French hospital emergency departments are not walk-in clinics. Go only if instructed by SAMU or your doctor, or if the situation is truly life-threatening.



Urgent Care Options (Non-Life-Threatening Issues)

If it's not a life-or-death emergency, you have other choices:

- SOS Médecins – A nationwide home-visit service for urgent, but non-emergency health issues (e.g., high fever, infections, flu symptoms). They operate 24/7 in most major cities. Call 3624 or book online at sosmedecins.fr.
- Pharmacies – Many pharmacists in France are highly trained and can advise on minor conditions or recommend over-the-counter treatments. Some even offer COVID tests, flu shots, and other basic care.
- On-Call Doctors (Médecin de garde) – After-hours and weekend services are available in each region. You can find your local duty doctor by calling 116 117 or checking with your mairie (town hall).

What to Bring or Have Ready

In a healthcare emergency, especially if you're heading to a hospital or urgent care clinic, it's essential to have:

- Your Carte Vitale (if you're already enrolled in the French system)
- Proof of health insurance (European Health Insurance Card, private expat policy, or travel insurance)
- A list of current medications, allergies, and health conditions
- Your passport and residency card, if available
- Emergency contact numbers

If you're not yet in the French healthcare system, you may need to pay for treatment up front and claim reimbursement from your insurer later. Always keep your receipts and medical reports.

Understanding the Ambulance System

Unlike North America, not all ambulances in France are staffed by paramedics. There are three main types:

1. Ambulance SMUR – Emergency doctor-staffed vehicle for critical cases
2. Ambulance privée – Private ambulance, often used for non-urgent medical transport (may not be equipped for emergencies)
3. VSL (Véhicule Sanitaire Léger) – Light medical vehicle, used for regular hospital trips (with doctor's prescription)

If you request an ambulance directly, be aware that non-urgent rides may not be covered by insurance unless arranged by your doctor.

Language Support and Emergency Translation

While many emergency professionals speak at least basic English, especially in urban centers, it's wise to:

- Learn basic medical terms in French
- Keep a bilingual medical card or translation app handy
- Prepare a written document with your health history in French for quicker communication

In summary, France offers fast, high-quality emergency medical care, but the system operates differently from what many expats are used to. Knowing who to call, how to access services, and what paperwork to carry can reduce panic and save precious time in a medical crisis.





HOME EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

How to Protect Your Home and Household from Common Hazards in France

While France is a safe and modern country, every home, whether in a city, village, or countryside, faces risks like electrical outages, gas leaks, plumbing failures, and even break-ins. As an expat, you may not be familiar with how to respond to these issues in your new environment, especially if the instructions are in French or if the emergency occurs after hours.

Utilities: Know the Shut-Off Points

The first step to emergency preparedness is knowing how to shut off your utilities in case of leaks or system failures:

- **Gas:** Locate the gas shut-off valve, typically near the meter. Learn how to turn it off if you smell gas (a sulfur or "rotten egg" smell). Leave the house immediately and call GRDF (Gaz Réseau Distribution France) at 0 800 47 33 33 from a safe location.
- **Electricity:** Your circuit breaker (disjoncteur) is usually inside the apartment or entry area. Learn which switches control which parts of your home. In a power outage, first check with your neighbors to see if it's localized, and then call Enedis (France's electricity grid) at 09 72 67 50 XX, replacing "XX" with your département number.
- **Water:** Identify where your main water valve is and know how to turn it off during a leak or burst pipe. Water damage is typical in apartment buildings and can escalate quickly.

Fire Safety in the Home

- **Smoke Alarms:** Since 2015, French law requires every home to have at least one smoke detector (détecteur de fumée). Check to ensure one is installed and functioning. If not, purchase one from a hardware store or major retailer like Leroy Merlin or Castorama.
- **Fire Extinguishers:** These are not mandatory in homes but highly recommended. A basic ABC powder extinguisher is suitable for most fires (electrical, cooking oil, wood). Store it near the kitchen and entryway.
- **Escape Plan**: In multi-level buildings, ensure you know:
    - The nearest fire exits
    - If stairwells are fire-rated
    - Where fire extinguishers and hoses are in common areas

Post your plan where all household members can see it and review it regularly.

Security and Break-In Prevention

Although France is generally safe, burglaries (Cambriolages) do occur, especially in specific neighborhoods or rural homes left unattended. Tips for minimizing risk:

- Install secure locks on all entry points
- Consider window bars or shutters (volets) on ground-floor windows
- Use motion-sensitive lights or timers when traveling
- Avoid leaving valuables in plain sight
- Don't list your full name on the mailbox or intercom—use initials instead

For extended absences, register with the local "Opération Tranquillité Vacances" at your local police station (gendarmerie), and officers will perform routine patrols to check on your home.

Appliance and System Maintenance

Preventative checks go a long way in avoiding emergencies:

- Have your boiler or heater inspected annually (this is often a legal requirement in France)
- Clean dryer vents and check washing machine hoses for wear
- If you use a wood-burning stove or chimney, it must be swept (ramoné) at least once a year by a certified professional

Keep a Paper Emergency File

Create a clearly labeled folder or binder containing:

- Emergency contact list (landlord, neighbors, emergency services)
- Warranty and service contracts for appliances
- Insurance documents
- Utility company numbers and account info
- Copy of your passport and visa

Store this file in an accessible but secure location, and include a digital copy on cloud storage as a backup.

A safe home is a prepared home. Knowing how to respond to gas leaks, power outages, and other household emergencies allows you to protect your family, your property, and your peace of mind—even in a new and unfamiliar setting.



EMERGENCY SUPPLY KIT RECOMMENDATIONS

What Every Expat Household in France Should Keep On Hand

Being prepared for an emergency doesn't stop at knowing who to call or where to go; it also involves having the right supplies ready in case of power outages, natural disasters, or situations that require evacuation or staying indoors for extended periods. As an expat in France, where some products may be unfamiliar or harder to access quickly, assembling an emergency supply kit is one of the smartest things you can do.

This section outlines what to include in both a basic household emergency kit and a go-bag (grab-and-go emergency bag), ensuring you're covered for a variety of scenarios.

Basic Emergency Kit for Home

This kit should be stored in an easily accessible place (not buried in storage) and reviewed every six months to update expired items. It should include:

Water and Food:

- At least 3 days' worth of drinking water (1–2 liters per person per day)
- Non-perishable food (e.g., canned goods, granola bars, dried fruit, rice cakes)
- Manual can opener
- Pet food, if applicable

Light and Power:

- Battery-powered or crank flashlight
- Extra batteries (AA, AAA, and any required for devices)
- Solar or hand-crank radio for weather and emergency alerts (preferably with FM/AM and USB charger capability)
- Fully charged power banks for mobile devices
- Candles and matches, or safer LED battery lights

Medical Supplies:

- Fully stocked first aid kit
- Prescription medications (minimum 7-day supply)
- Copies of prescriptions and dosage instructions
- Over-the-counter pain relievers, antiseptics, and allergy medications
- Glasses or contact lenses and solution

Personal Items:

- Toilet paper and moist towelettes
- Hand sanitizer and soap
- Feminine hygiene products
- Trash bags and zip-lock bags
- Masks (surgical or N95) are particularly useful in smoke, illness, or dust situations

Documents and Identification:

- Photocopies of passports, visas, residence permits, and insurance
- Printed emergency contact list
- Cash in small denominations (ATMs may not work)
- Translation card with key medical or legal phrases in French

Tools and Safety:

- Basic toolkit (screwdriver, wrench, duct tape)
- Swiss army knife or multi-tool
- Gloves and face masks
- Local map (paper format), especially useful if GPS services are down

Grab-and-Go Bag (Go-Bag)

In the event you need to evacuate quickly (due to fire, flood, or chemical hazard), every household member should have a small backpack with essentials:

- One or two changes of clothing
- Lightweight rain gear or jacket
- Copy of all key documents
- Bottle of water and energy snacks
- Flashlight and whistle
- Basic toiletries
- Spare house and car keys
- List of important phone numbers
- USB drive with copies of critical files

You can also create one family go-bag and supplement it with individual bags for kids or pets.

Go Bags and Car Kits

In addition to a home kit, consider packing a "go bag" for quick evacuations:

- Small backpack with essential ID, cash, meds, snacks, and phone charger
- Keep it near your front door or in your closet

If you own a vehicle, also store a car emergency kit:

- Bottled water, first aid kit, flashlight, jumper cables, and blanket

Pet-Specific Kit

Don't forget your furry or feathered companions. Include:

- Leash, collar, and ID tags
- Pet carrier or travel bag
- 3-day supply of food and water
- Vaccination and health records
- Comfort item (toy, blanket)
- Waste bags and cleaning supplies

Final Word

An emergency supply kit isn't something you want to build during a crisis. Taking time to assemble it now means you'll be prepared, calm, and capable—no matter the circumstances. It's a small investment of time and money that pays off in resilience and peace of mind.





FAMILY EMERGENCY PLANS

How to Prepare Your Household for Quick, Confident Responses in Crisis Situations

No one likes to think about disasters, accidents, or sudden disruptions—but when you live abroad, especially in a new environment where the systems and language may feel unfamiliar, being prepared is the best way to protect your loved ones. A well-structured family emergency plan ensures that everyone in your household knows what to do, where to go, and how to stay connected, even when you're separated or in a high-stress situation.

This section walks you through creating a clear, practical plan tailored to your family's specific needs, with a focus on simplicity, communication, and adaptability.

Start With a Household Meeting

Every good plan begins with a conversation. Gather your family members, whether it's a partner, children, elderly relatives, or even roommates, and talk through:

- The types of emergencies most likely to happen in your area (e.g., floods, power outages, accidents)
- How to respond in different scenarios (evacuation vs. sheltering in place)
- Who is responsible for which tasks (e.g., grabbing the emergency kit, securing pets, turning off utilities)

Use plain language and avoid fear-based messaging. The goal is clarity and calm, not alarm.

Establish Communication Protocols

Emergencies often disrupt normal communication channels. Prepare in advance with a layered communication plan:

- Primary contact person: Choose one relative or friend outside France whom everyone can call or message if local lines are down. This person can act as a central hub for relaying messages.
- Group messaging apps: Create a family WhatsApp, Signal, or Telegram group. Practice using it regularly so everyone is familiar with the app.
- Alternate methods: Teach older children and tech-resistant family members how to send texts, emails, or use emergency phone booths if needed.
- French key phrases: Have everyone memorize or carry translations for phrases like "I need help," "Where is the hospital?" or "I'm looking for my family."

Choose Meeting Points

Set two meeting places in case you're separated:

- Local meeting point – A recognizable location near your home (like a neighborhood café, school, or park).
- Regional backup location – A more distant place in case your neighborhood is inaccessible. This could be a friend's home, an embassy, or a hotel.

Make sure everyone knows how to get there on foot, by public transport, or by car.

Create a Child-Specific Plan

If you have children, make special arrangements, including:

- Who will pick them up if schools close unexpectedly?
- A card in their backpack with emergency contact numbers and addresses
- Explaining in simple terms what to do in specific situations (e.g., "If you can't reach Mom or Dad, go to this neighbor's house")
- Practicing fire drills or shelter-in-place procedures

Children take cues from adults—if you're calm, confident, and consistent, they will feel more secure too.

Account for Pets and Special Needs

Include plans for:

- Pet evacuation (carriers, leashes, food supply)
- Elderly or disabled household members, ensuring transport and medical support
- Essential medications or devices (CPAP machines, glucose meters, etc.) and how to access backups if electricity or pharmacy services are interrupted

Write It Down and Practice

Finally, formalize your plan:

- Write out instructions and contact details in a simple, printed guide
- Store it with your emergency kit and give copies to everyone in the household
- Run practice drills twice a year, especially if you have children

Being prepared is empowering—not just for you, but for everyone who depends on you. A family emergency plan provides the structure, safety, and confidence you need to act effectively under pressure—whether you're facing a flood warning, a medical crisis, or even a citywide strike that shuts down services unexpectedly.



RESOURCES FOR ONGOING EMERGENCY INFORMATION

How to Stay Informed Before, During, and After an Emergency in France

Being prepared for emergencies also means staying informed. In France, timely and accurate information can help you avoid danger, make wise decisions, and respond quickly. But as an expat, you may not always know which websites, apps, or authorities to trust—especially if French isn't your first language.

This section provides a list of essential tools, platforms, and official resources you can rely on to keep yourself and your family informed during all types of emergencies.

1. **FR-Alert (France's Official Emergency Notification System)**
FR-Alert is the government's mobile emergency alert system. It uses cell broadcast technology to send location-based alerts to all mobile phones in an affected area—no app needed. Alerts can cover:

- Natural disasters
- Terrorist threats
- Major accidents
- Public health emergencies

What to do:

- Make sure your mobile phone's location services are enabled.
- Keep your software up to date—most modern phones are compatible.
- Alerts may appear in French, so it's wise to understand keywords like:
    - Évacuation immédiate (Immediate evacuation)
    - Restez chez vous (Stay in your home)
    - Danger - ne sortez pas (Danger - do not go out)

2. **Météo-France (Weather Alerts and Warnings)**
www.meteofrance.com is France's national meteorological service. It provides real-time weather warnings and a daily color-coded alert system:

- Green: No danger
- Yellow: Be cautious
- Orange: Dangerous weather conditions
- Red: Severe, life-threatening conditions

Also available as a mobile app, Météo-France is essential for tracking storms, heatwaves, and flooding risks.

3. **Vigicrues (Flood Warning System)**
For those living near rivers or flood-prone areas, www.vigicrues.gouv.fr tracks river levels and predicts floods across France. You can view live data and monitor warning levels in your département.

4. **Embassy and Consulate Updates**
Your embassy is a critical source of information in national or regional emergencies. Many offer:

- Email and SMS alerts
- Security warnings
- Evacuation guidance
- Emergency contact support

Be sure to register:

- U.S. citizens: STEP – Smart Traveler Enrollment Program
- Canadians: ROCA – Registration of Canadians Abroad
- UK citizens: FCDO Travel Advice service

5. **Local Préfecture Websites and Social Media**
Each French département has a Préfecture, the local branch of national government, which coordinates emergency responses and public safety updates. Most maintain Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and dedicated alert systems for:

- Road closures
- Curfews
- Protests or strikes
- Public health risks

Search for "Préfecture de [your département]" and follow them on your preferred platforms.

6. **France Info and France Bleu (Radio and Online News)**
If internet or cell service fails, the radio can be a lifeline.

- France Info (105.5 FM) is the national 24/7 news radio channel.
- France Bleu is a network of regional radio stations with hyper-local updates.

Keep a battery-powered or crank radio in your emergency kit for continuous access to updates.

7. **Emergency Apps**
Download and familiarize yourself with:

- Ma Sécurité – Official French police app with emergency reporting tools and safety tips.
- Sécurité Civile – Sends real-time alerts for natural hazards.
- Google Translate or DeepL – To quickly translate alerts and instructions from French.

By combining national tools like FR-Alert and Météo-France with local resources from your Préfecture and embassy, you can build a comprehensive system to stay informed and act quickly during any type of emergency in France.

Final Word

Preparedness is not a one-time event—it's a continuous mindset supported by the right tools and habits. By bookmarking essential resources, installing key apps, and staying informed about local alerts, you'll be better equipped to anticipate, respond to, and recover from emergencies while living in France.

Please continue to Module 15:
Wrap-Up and Next Steps

