

# Striking back

Lightning and flash floods injure hundreds of Americans every summer. Here, 7 ways to reduce your risk.

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**O**ne minute Iva Lewis was talking on the phone in her Michigan office, gazing at the summer rain pelting her windows. The next minute, she was sprawled on the floor, injured and dazed, with a melted receiver at her side. Only later did Iva learn that lightning had struck her office building and shocked her through the phone wire. “My mother always said not to use the phone during a thunderstorm,” Iva says. “This is what it took for me to believe her.” Read on as storm experts share more surprising safety advice.

## IF YOU'RE INDOORS

**AVOID WIRES AND WATER** When lightning strikes a building, the electrical charge can surge through pipes and utility wires. That means you could get zapped if you're touching running water or any device that's plugged in—whether it's a landline phone or toaster, says Bud VanSickle, executive director of the Lightning Protection Institute, a nonprofit trade group. Stick to using wireless devices, and refrain from activities that require using the tap, such as washing dishes by hand.

**WAIT FOR QUIET SKIES** Even after the rain stops, it's often best to stay inside for a stretch. “Lightning can strike 10 miles from the storm itself,” says Chris Orr, a meteorologist in Rapid City, South Dakota. The easiest way to gauge your distance from a storm is by the sound of thunder, which generally doesn't travel more than 10 miles. If you can hear it, fear it.

## IF YOU'RE STUCK OUTDOORS

**SKIP MAKESHIFT SHELTER** It's tempting to take cover under a picnic gazebo or golf cart, but in open-sided structures with no conductors to channel strikes, a bolt's path of least resistance to the ground could be *you*. On top of that, these structures raise your risk of a lightning strike because of their height. “Keep moving toward suitable shelter, sticking to low-lying ground if possible,” says Donna Franklin of the National Weather Service.

**BRANCH OUT** Lightning commonly connects with trees because trees are tall. If struck, a tree conducts



potentially deadly current into the ground and can even explode from the bolt's extreme heat. Add in gale-force winds that can snap large branches, and the result is serious danger. Be smart and give trees a wide berth.

**BEWARE OF TINGLY HAIR** If your hair starts to feel staticky, or if you hear a buzzing sound in the air, a lightning strike might be imminent, Orr says. In that case, crouch down on the balls of your feet with your shoes touching, then tuck your head and cover your ears. This position slightly reduces the odds of a direct strike, and it minimizes injuries should a strike occur. When the staticky sensation passes, keep moving toward a building or car.

## IF YOU'RE DRIVING

**DON'T TOUCH THAT DIAL** It's not just a myth: Sitting inside a vehicle *is* safer than being outdoors during a storm, but not because of the rubber tires. “The car's metal body protects you by conducting electricity around the passenger cabin and into the ground,” VanSickle says. For this reason, avoid contact with any metal components, such as door handles or the radio dial.

**STEER CLEAR OF PUDDLES** Torrential rain can wash out chunks of road, creating puddles that look shallow but run deep. A mere 6 inches of water can stall a car engine, Orr says. Stalling increases the risk that another vehicle will hit yours, and it also leaves you vulnerable in the event of a flash flood. If you can't scoot around a large puddle, find another route or pull over in a nonflooded area until you verify that the road is passable. ■