WHAT TO KNOW about tsunamis

A tsunami is a series of sea waves, usually caused by a displacement of the ocean floor by an underwater earthquake. As tsunamis enter shallow water near land, they increase in height and can cause great loss of life and property damage.

Recent research suggests that tsunamis have struck the Oregon coast on a regular basis. They can occur any time, day or night. Typical wave heights from tsunamis occurring in the Pacific Ocean over the last 50 years have been 20-65 feet at the shoreline. However, because of local conditions a few waves may have been much higher – as much as 100 feet.

We distinguish between a tsunami caused by an underwater earthquake near the Oregon coast (a local tsunami) and an underwater earthquake far away from the coast (a distant tsunami).

WHAT TO DO for both local and distant tsunamis

1. Evacuate on foot, if at all possible. Follow evacuation signs and arrows to an Assembly Area.‡
2. If you need help evacuating, tie something white (sheet or towel) to the front door knob. Make it large enough to be visible from the street. If the emergency is a distant tsunami, then help may arrive. In the event of a local tsunami, it is unlikely that anyone will help you, so make a plan and be prepared!
3. Stay away from potentially hazardous areas until you receive an ALL CLEAR from local officials. Tsunamis often follow river channels, and dangerous waves can persist for several hours. Local officials must inspect all flooded or earthquake-damaged structures before anyone can go back into them.
4. After evacuation, check with local emergency officials if you think you have special skills and can help, or if you need assistance locating lost family members.

‡Assembly areas are shown on the map. Do not confuse Assembly Areas with Evacuation Centers, which are short-term help centers set up after a disaster occurs.

Local tsunami

A local tsunami can come onshore within 15 to 20 minutes after the earthquake — before there is time for an official warning from the national tsunami warning system. Ground shaking from the earthquake may be the only warning you have. Evacuate quickly!

Distant tsunami

A distant tsunami will take 4 hours or more to come ashore. You will feel no earthquake, and the tsunami will generally be smaller than that from a local earthquake. Typically, there is time for an official warning and evacuation to safety. Evacuation for a distant tsunami will generally be indicated by a 3-minute siren blast (if your area has sirens) and an announcement over NOAA weather radio that the local area has been put into an official TSUNAMI WARNING.

In isolated areas along beaches and bays you may not hear a warning siren. Here, a sudden change of sea level should prompt you to move immediately to high ground. If you hear the 3-minute blast or see a sudden sea level change, first evacuate away from shoreline areas, then turn on your local broadcast media or NOAA weather radio for more information.