



## Radiation Emergencies

CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) is an evidence-based framework for communicating effectively during public health emergencies. Communication is one of the fundamental tools in an emergency response and can significantly shape the outcome. CERC principles apply to any public health emergency and can help communicators, leaders, and responders communicate with the public in a radiation emergency.

**1. Be First.** People tend to continue to follow their first sources of information as an event unfolds, so it is important to get your agency's fact-based messages out first. There may be little or no warning before a radiation emergency. Reaching those who are affected with the information to keep them safe is a critical first step in a radiation emergency response.

- Preparedness helps you be first. Work with technical experts to make a communication plan with key messages. Plan for message dissemination and alternatives if mainstream communication sources are not functioning. Some examples could include Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), plans for printing and distributing information sheets, and trucks with loudspeakers.
- As soon as an event occurs, use all possible means to reach those who may be affected with the cross-agency authorized message: "*Get inside. Stay inside. Stay tuned.*"

**2. Be Right.** Communicators should work closely with response leadership, scientists, and medical experts. This is the only way to keep information and guidance current with an evolving event. Risk communication during a radiation emergency of any scale requires a delicate balance of speed and accuracy.

- Be transparent about what is known and what is not known. Stating where there are gaps in information helps prevent people from filling those gaps with speculation and rumors.
- Part of being right also means being understood. Use plain language in messaging. Prepare supportive messages for further explanation of concepts, event details, and the reasoning behind taking recommended actions.
- Train technical experts to serve as spokespersons and prepare ahead for some of the questions that are likely to arise.



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# Radiation Emergencies (continued)

**3. Be Credible.** During a radiation emergency, necessary protective actions will vary by location and change with time. People will need to trust the public health guidance, have confidence in its sources, and know they have a reliable place to turn to for timely life-saving information as the situation evolves.

- Messaging within and across response agencies must be consistent. Even small differences in wording can cause confusion or doubt.
- Only provide information that falls under your agency's expertise and responsibility. For example, in a terrorist event, law enforcement or the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) should answer questions about who may have caused the event while public health officials can explain safe decontamination.
- Provide regular updates in addition to any emergent announcements or messages. Let the public know how they can reliably get information.

**4. Express Empathy.** In a radiation emergency, people will feel a sense of shock and vulnerability. In large-scale attacks, there will be huge losses of life and infrastructure. People may become consumed with fear or grief. Acknowledging these experiences with empathy makes people feel heard and understood and therefore more receptive to listening to and following guidance from officials.

- Express empathy within the first 30 seconds of addressing the public. In some cases, the speaker may belong to the affected population but in others the speaker may be far removed.
  - » Example: “*We understand the anxiety and fear you feel while you shelter in place and await more information. We are committed to providing you with information and guidance on how to stay safe as the situation changes.*”
- Continue to communicate with empathy as messaging changes.
  - » Example: “*It may feel scary and disorienting to come out of your shelter or home right now. Experts have taken careful measurements of radiation levels and determined that the safest thing to do is evacuate the area.*”

- Priority messaging and outreach targets the affected population. A radiation emergency will likely get the attention of those outside of the area, as seen in the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, where people across the globe were concerned. Do not dismiss these concerns. Express an understanding of how they feel and provide facts about whether they face risks.

- » Example: “*Radiation emergencies are not common occurrences, and we understand people throughout the world may be anxious and afraid right now.*”

**5. Promote Action.** In an emergency people want to feel empowered, not victimized, and have something they can do. Action messages should be short and easy to remember as people may have many thoughts and concerns racing in their minds. In some cases, following these actions will save lives.



- The first message in a radiation emergency promotes action: “*Get inside. Stay inside. Stay tuned.*”

- In later response phases, as appropriate, people can be encouraged to make donations to those in the area or open their homes to evacuees.

**6. Show Respect.** Respectful communication is even more important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication builds rapport.

- Approach the public using plain language and providing explanations behind actions and orders. While you may be an expert and familiar with the nuances and possibilities in a radiation emergency, most people would not have that same knowledge. It's not something they need to think about every day.
- Never dismiss, laugh, or mock a person's questions. There are many myths and misperceptions about radiation.