

BULLETIN NO. 11

Lightning Safety Policy



A lightning safety policy should be in place at every facility where outdoor events are held. The policy should be made known in advance to all persons involved. The following components are recommended:

- An established chain of command that identifies who will make the decision to discharge participants and spectators from the field or activity.
- Decision criteria for determining when to suspend and when to resume activities.
- A designated weather watcher.
- A means of monitoring local weather forecasts and warnings. An inexpensive portable weather radio is recommended for obtaining timely storm data; however, the sound of thunder should always be considered an immediate warning.
- A list of specific safe locations for each field or site, with sufficient people in charge to route visitors and spectators to these locations.
- Posted informational signs or flyers at event sites outlining the lightning policy.
- Periodic review of the policy by all personnel involved in an event.
- Periodic drills should be conducted to assure the policy is workable and understood by event personnel.

Safe Shelter

The primary choice for a safe shelter from lightning is a fully enclosed building that has plumbing and electrical service. Plumbing and electrical systems provide a pathway for the lightning to become grounded, thus lessening the immediate danger to people inside. Do not take shelter under or near trees, bleachers, dugouts or picnic shelters. When inside a building, avoid using the telephone, taking a shower, washing hands or making any contact with conductive surfaces with exposure to the outside, such as metal door or window frames, electrical wiring, telephone wiring and plumbing fixtures.

The secondary choice for a safe location is a fully enclosed vehicle with a metal roof and closed windows. Convertibles and golf carts are not safe. School buses are an excellent lightning shelter, if strategically placed where people can quickly gain access to them.

When to Seek Shelter

Apply the 30/30 Rule: When you see lightning, count the seconds until you hear thunder. Sound travels about one mile in five seconds. If the count is 30 seconds or less, meaning the lightning strike was 6 miles or less away, suspend outdoor activities and seek proper shelter. Once activities have been suspended, wait 30 minutes or more after hearing the last thunder within the six mile radius rule of thumb before resuming an activity or returning outdoors. An emergency announcement should be read over the public address system directing people to shelter.

Lightning safety tips and/or the emergency action plan should be placed in game programs or flyers, alerting those in attendance about what to do and where to go to find a safe location during a thunderstorm. Lightning warning signs posted at event sites are an effective way to communicate lightning threats and action plans to the general public. Large athletic events can be particularly challenging when planning for lightning safety. A comprehensive approach may be the most effective method to lessen lightning danger, such as integrating weather forecasts and real-time thunderstorm data, engaging a weather watcher, making use of lightning detection equipment, and emphasizing the 30-30 rule.

For additional information or questions, please contact one of the following:

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The Iowa School Safety Coalition was formed in December 2012. Participating organizations include Iowa Homeland Security & Emergency Management, Iowa State Fire Marshal, Iowa Division of Intelligence and Fusion Center, Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Emergency Management Association, Des Moines Police Department, Iowa State Education Association, Iowa Association of School Boards, School Administrators of Iowa, American Institute of Architects – Iowa Chapter, EMC Insurance Companies.