

# Rehabilitation in Emergencies

## Did you know?

- Disasters, conflicts, terrorism, infectious disease outbreaks and other major incidents (such as transport collisions) can increase demand for rehabilitation through surges of new injuries and illnesses.
- All health emergencies can create challenges for people with new and pre-existing health issues and disabilities to access the rehabilitation care they require.
- Despite increased demand and clear benefits for rehabilitation services in times of health emergencies, rehabilitation needs are often not considered early enough in health responses or are neglected altogether.
- There is clear evidence for the benefits of rehabilitation in optimising outcomes following traumatic injury, infectious disease, and a broad range of non-communicable diseases. These benefits do not change during emergencies and should not be overlooked.
- In May 2023, the World Health Assembly passed a landmark resolution on strengthening rehabilitation in health systems. The resolution emphasised the importance of rehabilitation in emergency preparedness and response.

## What is rehabilitation in emergencies? Why is it important?

- Rehabilitation services may differ all over the world, however, in emergencies there is a focus on delivering essential services to prevent complications, support recovery, optimise functioning and reduce preventable impairment.

## Who needs rehabilitation in health emergencies?

- People may need rehabilitation because of new trauma or disease arising from the emergency.
- People with pre-existing physical, cognitive, sensory, and mental health conditions or disabilities may need rehabilitation due to exacerbations of their condition; for example, due to the loss of essential assistive products, caregivers, or medications, or due to a change in environment that worsens their condition. Rehabilitation and assistive products can support access to humanitarian and other support services for people with disabilities.
- People will continue to require rehabilitation for health conditions unrelated to the emergency.

## When should rehabilitation be integrated into health emergency responses?

- Ideally, rehabilitation commences at the earliest possibility following injury or illness. Rehabilitation is required from the onset of any health emergency response.
- Rehabilitation should be integrated into all levels of health care including acute, secondary and tertiary care.

## How should rehabilitation be integrated into health emergency responses?

- Rehabilitation services should be integrated into all health emergency risk management plans including preparedness, resilience, readiness, response and recovery planning.
- Rehabilitation professionals should be included in health emergency training activities. Well-prepared rehabilitation professionals understand their roles and responsibilities, including how to prioritise and deliver rehabilitation interventions in times of emergency.
- Due to the long-term rehabilitation interventions required for conditions such as traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, burns, amputation, and critical illness, increased demand for rehabilitation services following health emergencies will usually persist for much longer than the demand for surgical or medical services. Resourcing for rehabilitation responses as part of health emergencies should support the duration of increased demand in its entirety, even beyond the emergency.

## Next Steps...

1. **Read and share** the WHO policy brief 'Strengthening rehabilitation in health emergency preparedness, readiness, response and resilience'.



2. **Find out** about your local health emergency preparedness, readiness and response plans and ask if rehabilitation workers are included in local health emergency training.
3. **Participate** in personal and organisational preparedness activities and response training.
4. **Spread the word!** Raising awareness of the value and role of rehabilitation in health emergencies helps to build momentum towards the integration and activation of rehabilitation in health emergencies everywhere.



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