

Emergency Preparedness for Fish

By RVT Christine Archer

When an emergency strikes for fish keepers, it is very important to be as prepared as possible, to prevent the loss of your pets. Prepare an emergency kit and keep it stored somewhere accessible. It is possible to store the emergency kit items in the buckets or coolers that you will need in case of evacuation emergency. Gather up as many of the following items as you can:

- Battery powered air pump with airline and air stone, extra batteries
- Water vessel with dechlorinated water, 2-10L (no distilled water)
- Water dechlorinator
- Thermometer for water temperature monitoring
- Water testing kit
- Fish net
- Bucket and/or watertight insulated cooler
- Water pitcher or vessel with spout for easy pouring
- Hose for siphoning
- Fish bags
- Zipties or elastics
- Sharpie
- Flashlight with extra batteries
- Shipping heat packs
- Turkey baster or long pipette
- Card with contact info for emergency services and local vets

When an emergency strikes, it is important to take stock of the situation, without actually putting yourself at risk. Saving fish in an emergency can be time consuming and difficult. We love our fish, but it is important that you do not risk your own life or the life of your loved ones to save your fish tank. There have been many cases where fish come through emergencies unscathed or hardly any worse for wear. It is important that fish keepers do NOT release their pet fish into local waterways at any time, including before an emergency in a misguided effort to “save” their fish. Introduced fish species are extremely harmful to our local waterways. If you simply cannot keep your fish in a time of impending emergency, you would be better off returning them to a pet store.

Before taking any emergency action, it is important to understand whether you will need to evacuate, as this will change what emergency measures you must take immediately. One of the most important things you can do for your fish when a possible emergency may strike, such as risky weather, snowstorm, or flooding, is to do a large water change (50-60%), and completely cease feeding your fish for at least 24 hours, or at least as long as possible, before a disaster may hit. Many pet fish can actually go for weeks without food, and food will only serve to foul your potentially limited water supply. Do not feed your fish at all for the duration that they will not have access to a filter. Regardless of whether you keep your fish in their tank, or transfer them to a bag or bucket to move them, you can use a large pipette or a turkey baster to manually remove any fish waste which may accumulate. For larger amounts of waste, a siphon hose can be used. Be sure to replace any removed water with clean water.

When an emergency occurs, but you do not have to evacuate, your fish may be able to stay in their tank. Place the airline and air stone in the tank, and attach to the battery powered air pump. Depending on how well stocked the tank is, the fish may require supplemental aeration, and the air stone will provide that. Many tropical fish prefer warm temperatures (25-28°C), however they will tolerate temperatures closer to 22°C for a few days, as long as the temperature changes gradually. If you are concerned about the water temperature getting too cool, such as during the winter, it may be wise to catch your fish and place them in small groups or individually in fish bags filled with mostly tank water (some fresh, clean dechlorinated water will be beneficial) inside an insulated cooler or large bucket, where you can place heat packs in the container with them to keep the temperature close to 25°C. The problem with putting your fish in bags is that they will have limited air supply. It is important to ensure each bag has a good air to water ratio- at least as much air volume as water volume. The air will help to ensure the fish can stay oxygenated for 24-48hrs. Use an elastic or easily removed ziptie on the bag in order to refresh the air supply and gently agitate the water every couple of days or sooner if you notice the fish surface breathing in their bags.

If you do have to evacuate, package up your fish in bags as previously described. Try to bring clean water with you if possible, and do attempt to vent the bags for fresh air every couple of days. Bring extra elastics and bags in case of leaks. If any fish do not survive, remove them immediately to prevent the spread of illness or fouling of water.

For periods of more than a few days where fish do not have access to a filter, water testing will become valuable in order to conserve limited water. Test primarily for ammonia, but nitrite is also valuable. These two waste products are harmful to fish, and water should be partially changed if any more than a trace is noted in the fish water. Read your testing manuals for more information.

While it may seem daunting or overwhelming to deal with fish in an emergency situation, try to remember the journey that many pet fish make to get to your aquarium, and perhaps you will feel a bit better about how your fish may fare in an emergency. Fish are often shipped to North America from Asia in extremely crowded bags, and may endure more than 48 hours of shipping this way. They are then shipped to the pet store by once again being bagged up for a day or more. All we can try to do is the best to try and save our pet fish in an emergency. Being prepared for most emergency scenarios is one of the best things a fish keeper can do. You may not be able to save every fish, but you can make a difference for most of them.