

East side of basement best place to be when twister hits

An Eastern Michigan University climatologist has found some new evidence about southeastern Michigan tornadoes which may change the best places of shelter in homes and public buildings.

According to George Howe, most tornadoes which touch down in southeastern Michigan move from the west or northwest toward the east or southeast. "This could be an important consideration in knowing where the safest part of a building is," he said.

Howe notes that because 86 per cent of the nation's tornadoes come out of the southwest, meteorologists have advised people in the path of a twister to seek shelter in that corner of their basement or other dwelling. But

recent findings warn that the places traditionally deemed the safest may be the most dangerous places to be should a tornado hit.

"Most recent studies and evidence indicate that the part of the building opposite the direction the tornado is coming is the safest," Howe says. "This is based partly on the fact that we know the majority of damage is done by winds rather than the pressure differential; the strongest winds would be on the 'right-hand side' of the tornado track."

Howe said 59 per cent of the tornadoes which touched down in southeastern Michigan between 1951 and 1975 came out of the west or northwest. This means that the safest place

for most state residents in this area is the east side of the basement or lowest floor. Elsewhere in the lower peninsula, the best shelter is the northeast corner or north wall of the basement, since tornadoes in the rest of the state usually come out of the southwest.

Nationally, the peak months for tornadoes are April and May, when weather conditions are the most unstable. Although most of the state shares similar tornado statistics, the southeast corner is a different animal.

"The eastward and southeastward moving tornadoes occur most frequently in June and July," Howe says, "so the greatest risk in southeastern Michigan is during that two-month period."

June, he says, is the biggest month for tornadoes in this region. More than a third of the 92 tornadoes reported in the past 25 years have touched down in June. The others were evenly distributed from April through August.

Howe sees siren warning systems as a futile attempt at protecting people from twisters. Sirens are ineffective, he says, because they usually cannot warn people in time and often cannot reach enough people in the tornado's path.

"The possibility of a damaging tornado in any year or any month is rather small for any point or small area," he said, "and the time available is so short once a tornado is sighted. It's better for people to note

that they are in a tornado watch area and keep an eye on weather conditions."

If people under a tornado watch keep an eye on the sky, they probably will be able to take action on their own, he says. A tornado may be spawned from dark storm clouds

which develop irregular bottoms, pouches or sacs. People usually can hear a twister coming.

"The indications are that one would have a minute or two by the time you hear the sound, which usually sounds much like a low-flying jet airplane," Howe said.

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