

Quake experts say don't run!

Series of temblors highlight need for safety review

Sarah Gordon, Escondido North County Times, 6-24-10

Drop, cover and hold on. Do not run outside. And forget about standing in a doorway.

The region's been jiggling a lot recently ---- including a 4.0 magnitude temblor on the Imperial County line Thursday morning, just one of hundreds of aftershocks from the large Easter quake centered near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Confused and potentially risky reactions to the recent quakes, especially the bigger ones, reveal that plenty of people still need to brush up on earthquake safety, said emergency services personnel and quake experts recently.

"We can tell people, and it's like white noise, but when it actually happens, they get nervous and emotions take over," said Yvette Urrea Moe, spokeswoman for the San Diego County Office of Emergency Services.

A half-dozen North County residents interviewed immediately after Easter Sunday's 7.2 magnitude quake centered in Baja California told a reporter they headed straight outside during the shaking.

But running outside is almost always the wrong thing to do, said Urrea Moe. The majority of people injured in earthquakes are struck by falling or flying objects, such as bookcases, light fixtures or broken windows.

And outside, a building's architectural details, facade and roofing elements create real hazards, as do trees, power lines, signs and utility poles, she said.

The consensus among earthquake experts is that people should "Drop, Cover and Hold On."

That means if you're inside and the earth starts moving, you should drop to the floor ---- before you fall ---- take cover under something, such as a table, and hold onto it, so you stay with it if it moves around, experts say.

The idea is to protect your body, and most of all, your head, Urrea Moe said.

If you're in a room without a table or desk, hunker down next to an interior wall and cover your head with your arms, experts say.

If outdoors, experts recommend moving to a clear area, if possible, dropping and covering.

She urged people to delete a popular chain e-mail called the "Triangle of Life." The message claims the safest place to be in an earthquake is next to a piece of prominent furniture, not under it. Urrea Moe said years of studies on earthquake survival contradict the message's advice.

And standing in a doorway is an outmoded practice, left over from a time when a door frame was believed to be, and often was, the strongest part of the structure, Urrea Moe said. But in modern buildings, the doorway is no stronger than many other areas, and a person's head and body are not particularly protected there, she said.

Dramatic images of collapsed buildings after major earthquakes in other countries add to the fear of riding out a quake indoors, but in the developed world, it's almost always the safest option, said Mark Benthien, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Earthquake Country Alliance, a coalition of science groups and government agencies.

"Our buildings rarely collapse, so the issue of running out because you're afraid the building is going to collapse is really not an issue in California," Benthien said

Urrea Moe said people need to practice their response to an earthquake, and she said she hoped more workplaces and families would take part in the Great California ShakeOut, an annual statewide earthquake drill planned for October. In 2009, the event's second year, about 440,000 schoolchildren in San Diego County took part and about 485,000 in Riverside County. But Urrea Moe said adults need practice, too.

"If people would just drill, it would become second nature and it wouldn't become something that's embarrassing," she said.

Pat Abbott, a former geology professor from San Diego State University who has written a textbook on natural disasters, said quakes can increase in intensity through time. So it's best to drop and cover at any rumbling, and not to worry about the appearance of overreacting.

He suggested mental preparations, too ---- imagining an earthquake response for different locations.

"I just wish people would do more virtual earthquakes, thinking to themselves, 'If I'm sitting in this room in the house, and a big earthquake breaks loose, what should I do?'" Abbott said.

At least the Easter earthquake and a 5.2 magnitude quake last Monday centered near Ocotillo helped people understand that major shakers can last awhile and get stronger, and those sensations will be unnerving, he said. If a large-magnitude earthquake ever hits the region, Abbott suggests keeping fear in check by thinking about what to do after it's over.

"Then they're thinking, 'When this stops, I'm going to go turn off the natural gas line, or I'm going to go check across the street,'" Abbott said. "I think that kind of thinking helps people focus. Your emotions aren't going to help you at all."