

Drop, Cover and Hold (DCH)

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What to do when the Shaking starts — the first step in saving your own life

Because a powerful earthquake could begin in the next minute, a wise thing to know is what to do when that earthquake starts to happen – when the shaking starts. Of course, there are several things you can do, and we sincerely hope you have done those things, but in this writing we are only concerned with this very first step – Drop, Cover and Hold (DCH). Those steps after DCH require prior planning and some prior acquisition of supplies and equipment. Additional steps also involve coordinating with other people and working in teams. This first step of DCH requires none of those things. This first step only requires that you decide if you will try to escape where you are, or use Drop, Cover and Hold (DCH). Because choosing DCH can be a life-or-death decision, understanding your choices is critical to your survival.

Because DCH requires mental alertness, awareness and preparation for what to do when the shaking starts, thinking, heeding details of your surroundings and planning accordingly is paramount. From now on, as you enter ANY interior space, your first duty is to decide which action option you will use when the shaking starts. You have just two options – FLEE or SHIP. FLEE means you'll attempt to exit that space, SHIP (Shelter-In-Place) means you will stay in that space and seek cover.

Upon entering the interior space, immediately assess your options. FLEE is a valid option IF and only IF you can, in 2 to 3 seconds, get to and through an exit to the open air outside and get completely clear of the space and the structure. If you can't FLEE, you must SHIP (which means DCH). To be bluntly clear, for most interior spaces FLEE is NOT an option. And you'll have only about 2-3 seconds to decide which option to use. Obviously, 2-3 seconds is not much time.

Because the next the Cascadia Subduction Zone (CSZ) earthquakes can strike here in western Washington in the next second, you need to start practicing your FLEE or SHIP decision-making choice right now. IF you have trained yourself to make the “FLEE or SHIP” choice upon entering each interior space AND you've constantly updated your plan as you move about the interior space, so you KNOW without hesitation what you will do when the shaking starts, THEN you will significantly increase your chances of surviving the CSZ calamity. Let's take a close look at both options to be sure you fully understand your two choices.

To use the “FLEE” option means being able to get to and through an outside door or window or hatchway – any kind of exterior exit - within 2-3 seconds. Think about those two to three seconds carefully. If you are Usain Bolt, who can cover 25 yards in three seconds from a sprinter's starting position, that's possibly a good option for Usain Bolt. You're not Usain Bolt. So, to reiterate the most obvious choice, nearly always, your only real option when inside a building is Shelter In Place – SHIP.

The procedure for SHIP is DCH – Drop, Cover, Hold. **DROP** means getting immediately down on the floor. **COVER** means getting under something that can provide protection – OR – if you can't crawl under a table or desk or counter or sturdy chair then cover and protect your head to prevent injury from flying and falling debris. Protecting your head is critical. Besides causing objects to fall off shelves and countertops, strong earthquakes also propel loose objects sideways with substantial force. So, protecting your head is a key part of the COVER step. **HOLD** means holding onto whatever is providing you protection. HOLD until the shaking stops. Wherever you are, expect to be there for 30 to 45 seconds because that's how long the shaking will last, and you need to stay as protected as much as possible for that entire time. When a super strong earthquake is battering your surroundings, 30 to 45 seconds will seem like an eternity. When the shaking does finally stop, check yourself for injuries and then you can decide your next action.

Let's review.

1. CHECK - Upon entering the interior space immediately decide whether your best option is to run outside (FLEE) or drop, cover and hold (SHIP). Could you get outside in two to three seconds? If you're not able to move quickly out into the open, then use those same panther skills and use those precious two to three seconds to get under cover at the first indication of shaking.
2. DROP – When the shaking starts. Get down flat as you can. Think war time with enemy gun fire coming at you and GET DOWN NOW because things will be flying over your head just like gunfire and the lower you get the better
3. COVER – Get under something, anything, if you can. And protect your head. If you are at work, keep a helmet – any kind of helmet under your desk. If you're at home, keep a couple of helmets in the rooms where there is no cover to get under.
4. HOLD – Hold onto whatever you can that is attached to the structure or furniture that you're using for protection
5. WAIT – Wait until the shaking stops. Then, check yourself for injuries. Finally, decide how to move to a better, safer place if you can move safely, and check for the well-being of others in your area.

The rest of the immediate survival steps are in the 9 Steps for Survival – which is in another piece on Readiness and Emergency Preparedness. Look for that piece either here on the PEP-C Website or use Google to find the “9 Steps for Earthquake Emergency Preparedness” videos. Watch the videos and you will learn what else you'll need to do.