

Helene threatens to wash away people's medicine

The inability to refill lost or ruined medications during hurricanes is an overlooked health risk, advocates say.

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The closure of drug stores can lead to hospitals being overwhelmed in areas hit by hurricanes. Gerald Herbert/AP

CLIMATEWIRE | Hurricane Helene's devastating flooding and the rushed evacuations to escape the storm are jeopardizing people's ability to take critical medications.

The cyclone catapulted from an unnamed tropical storm to a Category 4 hurricane over two days, a rapid intensification that brought massive storm surge along the coast and up to 20 inches of rain in some places along the eastern Gulf Coast. That increased the possibility of lost, damaged or misplaced medications, according to some health care advocates, who say the unavailability of prescription drugs during hurricanes is an overlooked health risk.

Veronica Robleto, the director of the Rural Women's Health Project, is already trying to help people replace the medications they lost during Hurricane Helene. Her group works with farm workers in Florida's Big Bend region, where the storm made landfall Thursday night.

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It was only last month when Hurricane Debby struck the same region as a Category 1. Robleto said her group heard from a number of people in Live Oak, Florida, where their mobile homes were “completely flooded” and their prescriptions damaged.

“There was a lot of water damage and prescriptions that were damaged or lost due to water, but it was hard for those members to get the drugs they need because the flooding also closed the pharmacies,” she said.

Drug stores play a critical role in health care by providing medication to patients. When they close during hurricanes, people often turn to the only place that might fill their prescriptions: hospitals. But that can clog up emergency rooms during a crisis.

“People who have diabetes still have diabetes after a hurricane, they still need medicines after a storm and pharmacies being open help them access their medicines without overrunning hospitals,” said Tom Cotter, executive director of the nonprofit Healthcare Ready, which has a website that helps (<https://healthcareready.org/rxopen/>) people find open drug stores during storms.

That can be daunting.

CVS Pharmacy stores, for example, “comply with all local evacuation orders,” according to the company’s website. CVS locations will reopen “as soon as it is safe to do so,” but that can take days depending on flooding and power outages.

When Hurricane Idalia last summer hit the same area of the gulf where Helene is forecast to make landfall, it closed potentially thousands of pharmacies across Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. Data tracked by Healthcare Ready saw the number of confirmed closures rise from 48 on the day the storm made landfall as a Category 4 storm to 70 the next day. But the number of pharmacies whose status was unknown — possibly because they were without power and unable to report their status — skyrocketed from 1,650 the day of landfall to more than 17,600 the next day.

Guidance from Florida’s emergency management department (<https://www.floridadisaster.org/globalassets/fdem-hurricane-guide-2024-1.pdf>) advises people to have “at least seven days of supplies”— including medicines — leading up to a storm.

During a state of emergency, Florida law allows pharmacists to refill prescriptions before patients normally would be eligible for more medication. Pharmacists also can dispense up to 30-day supplies of medications for chronic conditions. State law requires health insurers to cover such refills.

That law was passed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005. Many evacuees sought shelter in Birmingham, Alabama, where emergency rooms became overrun with patients who had forgotten their medications at home. Research after the storm (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2646478/>) found that those evacuees had trouble accessing drugs due to state limits on emergency refills.

Some disaster-prone states now have similar prescription access laws. But Georgia, where Hurricane Helene has caused flooding, only allows pharmacists to issue a 72-hour supply of emergency medicine.

That worries Cotter of Healthcare Ready, who noted that Helene is hitting states that are less accustomed to hurricanes, potentially creating prolonged closures of pharmacies.

“Georgia, Tennessee — these areas do not have the same infrastructure as Florida or Louisiana to deal with this, so the health impacts can be the same magnitude even from a weaker storm up there,” he said.