Flood victims Kamala (right) and her daughter R. Uthayamalar have begun clearing their home in Taman Desa Damai in Penang and salvaging whatever they can. Gary Chen/The Star

For five days after the floods, Kamala Ramalingam was confined to the second floor of her two-storey house in Taman Desa Damai, Bukit...
Thankfully, Kamala has received food aid and has not been left hungry.

"My children don’t want me to come downstairs too much as everything is still wet and muddy. They fear that I may slip and fall.

“This is the worst (flood) I have ever experienced. I’ve lived here for over 40 years and, yes, we’ve had floods before but never this bad. The water in the house was waist high!” says Kamala, still in disbelief.

Kamala is thankful that she’s safe, but the septuagenarian can’t help thinking about all that she’s lost in the flood.

Kamala (left) is thankful that she is safe but is distraught at all she’s lost. Gary Chen/The Star

“I’ve lost everything. My furniture, my cupboards, my blood pressure monitor … all gone. The next time it rains, I’m not leaving my house. And, I’m not going to buy expensive furniture or anything any more. Everything is gone,” she says, close to tears.

Kamala was attending a wedding not too far from her home when her son, who lives near her, called to tell her about the flooding.
Extra vulnerable

Senior citizens are among the most vulnerable in natural disasters such as floods, says Universiti Malaya Medical public health specialist Dr Marzuki Isahak.

“Extreme weather affects people of all ages and many older people are able to cope by themselves. But there are those who are at risk. These include those with health conditions, disabilities or limited mobility. Also, those who are living alone or with a spouse who is also elderly and are isolated from the community. It is this segment of the elderly who are more at risk,” says Dr Marzuki.

Out of the seven fatalities of the recent floods in Penang, five were senior citizens. This isn’t an anomaly: most of the 1,400 fatalities in Hurricane Katrina in 2005 were elderly. It was the same with the floods in Chennai, India in 2015.

The risks the elderly face are similar to what others have to contend with: physical safety; no access to food, clean water and other basic provisions; not being able to contact their loved ones or to ask for help if telephone lines are affected and damage to property, documents and valuables.

However, the danger is more acute simply because they are older.
“Injuries and accidents can happen to anyone in fast flowing flood water, but it is more dangerous for older people. Those with limited mobility or visual impairments are at an even greater risk as they tend to react relatively slowly,” Dr Marzuki points out.

Seniors who are on daily medication or need treatment like dialysis are even more vulnerable as the disasters will have a direct effect on their well being.

Apart from physical health concerns, disasters can also be distressing and cause seniors to feel anxious and nervous, as in the case of Kamala.

“Imagine watching the water level rise and rise … seeing their furniture and possessions floating around them. Having to live elsewhere temporarily is also stressful as most older people like to age in place,” says Dr Marzuki.

**An emergency plan**

There are measures that can be taken to ensure the safety of senior citizens during disasters, says UMMC’s Dr Noran Mohd Hairi.

“Maybe we can’t predict when a disaster is coming, but we can be prepared to some extent. Children can’t always be with their elderly parents. But they can make sure their parents have a mobile phone so that they can still be connected when land lines are down. They must also save the important contact numbers of people or organisations they can call for help … Bomba, neighbours, NGOs and so on. There are many organisations who are ready with help, but it is of little use if the seniors can’t reach them,” says Dr Noran.

Preparing an “emergency kit” is also a good idea, she says. For an elderly person, the kit should have all the medications they need as well as their prescription chits, documents and medical cards, for example. Other essentials they must have are clean water, some non-perishable food, a Torch, a radio or a mobile phone, and a blanket.
leader has a list ready, an emergency response can be planned ahead of time. We can start planning now for the next disaster,” says Dr Noran.

President of the Penang Senior Citizens Associations A.A. Raja also urges owners of old folk homes and nursing care facilities to avoid choosing locations that are prone to floods.

“The two nursing homes in Jalan P. Ramlee and Lengkok P. Ramlee in Penang were hit by floods in the past. This should have been a warning and the owners should have found a better location. When it floods, the water rises quickly and it is hard to get the elderly out fast,” he says.

“And if it happens in the middle of the night … who is going to be there to help?”

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