

EARTHQUAKE EXPERIENCES

The USGS distributes questionnaires after an earthquake to determine its intensity, which is measured by the Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale (MMI). On January 17, 1994, an earthquake hit Northridge, California. Each paragraph below is a response to the USGS questionnaire from a person in a different zip code region in that area. The magnitude of the Northridge earthquake measured 6.7, but its intensity varied throughout the region.

Zip Code: 90027

“I was driving home from work and it felt like I had a flat tire. I pulled off the road to check and as I stopped the car I saw the chimney on a nearby house collapse. It fell right on a new Lexus that was parked in the driveway.”

Zip Code: 90037

“I had just gotten up to give my baby daughter her bottle when I felt a violent jolt. I knew we were having an earthquake so I tried to run into her room to get her but it was so hard to walk! I could hear things outside falling and hitting the ground, and all of the pictures in the hall were falling and breaking. I was so scared!”

Zip Code: 90044

“I was asleep when the earthquake hit. It woke me up right away. I wasn’t sure what to do so I stayed in bed and watched the pictures on the wall swing.”

Zip Code: 90503

“I am a nurse at a local hospital. I was attending to Mr. Jones when I first felt the earthquake. He woke up and we watched a glass of juice on his bedside table slide back and forth. I caught it before it tipped. Most of the patients woke up. Let me tell you, it was a long night!”

Zip Code: 90706

“My parents were out of town visiting my brother at college so my best friend John and I decided to have a party. The party was pretty much over and we were doing damage control in the backyard when I felt something weird. I thought it was just me, but then everything started to shake. I mean, even the pool had waves in it and the water was spilling out over the edges! And so much stuff in the house had fallen over and broken you couldn’t even tell we had a party!”

Zip Code: 90720

“I was asleep when I felt my bed start to shake. I thought it was my brother but then I realized it was an earthquake. I was scared but then I remembered that my mom had said if there was an earthquake to get under the kitchen table and hold on. I could see things falling — pictures and books and dishes and stuff. It was pretty scary but we were all okay.”

Zip Code: 90650

“My wife woke me up and asked if I felt anything. I told her that I certainly did not feel anything except her shaking me. She said she thought she felt an earthquake but maybe it was a big truck — we live close to the freeway. Turns out it was an earthquake, a pretty big one! Who knew!”

Zip Code: 90631

“I work the late shift at Denny’s. I was outside on my break when I felt the first shake. Then everything started shaking so hard I could even hear the bushes rattling! The people inside felt it, too. Their plates and glasses were shaking and bouncing and a bunch of them came running outside. I don’t know where they thought they were going to go — it was shaking outside too!”

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Zip Code: 90808

"I am from Virginia and I was in California visiting my grandchildren. In the very middle of the night I woke up and felt a strange rumbling. Then things started to shake a bit and my grandson ran into my room and told me to stand in the doorway, that we were having an earthquake. Well, that door was swinging back and forth and I told him that I would stay right where I was, thank you very much! I wasn't going to get knocked out by some door and have to be taken to the hospital in my nightclothes!"

Zip Code: 90806

"I am a really heavy sleeper and I didn't even wake up, but my husband was up getting a snack and he said he felt it. He said the dishes in the cupboard rattled and he could see the hanging plants swaying."

Zip Code: 91011

"I am a seismologist with the USGS and my first thought when I felt the earthquake was, 'I'm going to work tonight!' My husband and I watched as several picture frames slid off the mantle, and then we ducked under the table. We had to hold on because the table was trying to slide away. A few dishes that had been left out fell and broke, but we suffered no severe damage."

Zip Code: 91311

"I was sleeping soundly when I was suddenly thrown out of bed. I could hear my kids crying and I was trying to run, trying to get to them. The walls were shaking and cracking and pieces of plaster were falling from the ceiling. I could barely stand. The noise was deafening. By the time I got to my kids and got them outside the whole thing was over. We have a lot of damage to our house but not as much as our neighbors. Their house partially collapsed."

Zip Code: 91706

"I thought the earthquake was great! What a ride! I was up studying for my English test when I felt the shaking. I could hear the house creak and some of the dishes were clinking and making noise. I wonder if we'll still have the test?"

Zip Code: 91384

"I'm a night watchman at an apartment complex. It was pretty late and everything was real quiet. I was making my rounds when I felt a strong jolt — it almost knocked me off my feet! I ran out into the middle of the street and it's a good thing I did, too! Bricks were falling off of the building and the trees were shaking so hard that branches were breaking and falling off. All of the parked cars around me were shaking and bouncing and the car alarms were all going off."

Zip Code: 91320

"My daughter had just arrived home (way past her curfew) and we were arguing in the den. When we felt the shaking we just stared at each other. The sound of a glass smashing snapped us out of it. We both ran to the china hutch, where I keep my mother's china — it was just about to tip over! We held it up and we could hear other things around the house falling and breaking. Needless to say, I wasn't worried about the curfew violation any more!"

Zip Code: 91745

"I had a terrible cold and I had just taken some Nyquil and had finally fallen asleep. When the earthquake woke me up I was more irritated than scared. After the shaking stopped I walked around and picked up a few knickknacks that had fallen and put them back on the shelves. It was no big deal, but it took me forever to get back to sleep!"

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Zip Code: 93015

“I was up late working on a briefing when I first felt the earthquake. It didn’t seem too bad at first so I stayed put to see if it would get worse. It did! I tried to get up and could barely stand. I remembered that you’re supposed to get under a table if it’s a bad earthquake so I got down on my hands and knees and crawled under my table. Just as I got under there my big bookcase fell and smashed on the table. If I had still been sitting there it would have crushed me.”

Zip Code: 93505

“We were out of town when the earthquake hit. Of course, we were scared for our friends and family and for our home. We called our son and he said that everyone was alright, but they had a lot of structural damage to their house, and had lost some personal items. We called the neighbors and they gave us a grocery list of damage to our house — chimney broken at the roofline, cracks in the masonry, fallen bricks, stuff like that. I’m afraid to go home and see the damage inside.”

Zip Code: 93023

“My husband woke me up yelling that we were having an earthquake. As we ran into the kitchen I could hear the plates and cups banging and rattling, and all of the pictures were falling off the walls. We grabbed the dog and all got under the table. I knew we were going to be alright because our house is retrofitted and all of our things are secured, but I was worried about my mom and dad.”

Zip Code: 91754

“I was asleep when the earthquake came. I was so scared and I didn’t know what to do. The house was shaking so bad that I couldn’t even walk. My dad came into my room and got me and we got under the table. We could see the refrigerator sliding back and forth across the kitchen with its door opening and shutting and all of the stuff falling out onto the floor. Our TV went flying across the room and smashed into the wall. All over we could hear things breaking. Then the lights went out. After it stopped we went outside. We could see all of the other people outside too. They were crying and looking around. Part of our apartment building fell down and now those people have to find another place to live. We might have to, too.”

Zip Code: 93060

“I was asleep in my tent when I felt the earthquake. It woke up my whole family, and all of the other campers in the campground. Since there were no rocks, trees or buildings around we all felt pretty safe. It was a thrilling way to experience the power of nature.”

Zip Code: 93523

“I was just finishing a great Tom Clancy novel when I felt the earthquake. At first I thought it was a passing truck but then I noticed that the blinds were swinging a little bit. I thought about calling my buddy to see if he had felt it but it was late and I was pretty sure it wouldn’t have woken him up.”

Zip Code: 93501

“I was sleeping over at my friend’s house when the earthquake came. We were supposed to be asleep but we were telling stories so we felt it first. She said that her family had an earthquake plan and we were supposed to go into the dining room and get under the table. It was kind of scary because all of the furniture was moving around and her dad’s computer fell on the floor and broke, but I wasn’t really scared because her mom and her dad said that we were prepared and we’d be okay.”

Credit: Questionnaire responses courtesy of USGS

For information about earthquakes, and more, go online to National Geographic: Forces of Nature, at www.nationalgeographic.com/forcesofnature.