Cell Phone Amber Alerts: What You Need to Know

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WHAT IS IT?

As of Jan. 1, a new wireless emergency alert system sends out Amber Alerts to cell phones.

Since last year, the system has also sent out other types of alerts. For example, alerts were sent out to warn people during Hurricane Sandy on the East Coast.

WHO GETS THEM?

Most people with newer phones have the emergency alert system automatically activated. The new Amber Alert system replaces a prior "opt-in" system that went offline Dec. 31 and alerted about 700,000 people who had signed up nationally.

The messages are geographically specific, going to people within the reach of a particular region's cell towers. So a person vacationing in Los Angeles might receive a text, whereas someone with a California number visiting Boston would not.

Participating service providers include AT&T, Cellcom, Cricket, Sprint, Nextel, T-Mobile, US Cellular, Verizon Wireless and Bluegrass Cellular, said Amy Storey, a spokeswoman for CTIA, a wireless industry association.

WHAT DO THE ALERTS LOOK AND SOUND LIKE?

They look like text messages, but are free, and sent over a system administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The phone will go off with a high-pitched roughly 10-second tone and vibrate multiple times. The messages are limited to 90 characters. If you silence your phone the tone will not go off, but you'll still see the message on your screen.

HOW DO I TURN IT OFF?

To turn off the alarms on many phones you can opt out under your phone settings or send a text message to your service provider. Contact your service provider for more details.

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