

Fire Safety Facts, Fire Prevention and Household Tips

Would you know what to do if a fire started in your home? Would your child? Take the time now to review fire safety facts and tips so your family will be prepared in the event of a fire emergency in your home.

Fire Prevention

Of course, the best way to practice fire safety is to make sure a fire doesn't break out in the first place. That means you should always be aware of potential hazards in your home. Start by keeping these tips in mind.

Check all electrical appliances, cords, and outlets: Are your electrical appliances in good condition, without loose or frayed cords or plugs? Are your outlets overloaded with plugs from the TV, computer, printer, video game system, and stereo? Are you overusing an extension cord? Do the light fixtures in your home contain bulbs that are the correct wattage? Does your home contain GFCI's (ground-fault circuit interrupters) and/or AFCI's (arc-fault circuit interrupters), which prevent electrical shock and fire by shutting off faulty circuits? Look around your house for potential problems. And unless you're a trained electrician, be careful about do-it-yourself electrical projects. Studies have shown that many home fires are caused by improper installation of electrical devices.

Other tips:

- Replace or professionally repair any appliances that spark, smell unusual, or overheat.
- Don't run electrical wires under rugs.
- Make sure lamps and night-lights are not touching bedspreads, drapes, or other fabrics.
- Use caution when using electric blankets.
- Don't let kids use kitchen appliances by themselves and supervise any art or science projects that involve electrical devices.
- Cover any outlets that are not in use with plastic safety covers if you have toddlers or young children in your home.

Be especially vigilant about portable heaters: The number of residential fires always goes up during colder months, peaking between December and February. Portable space heaters substantially contribute to this increase. Before plugging in your space heater, make sure you know how to use it safely:

- Carefully read the directions for its use.
- Never place a space heater where a child or pet could accidentally knock it over.
- Never place a space heater too close to a bed, especially a child's bed.
- Keep newspapers, magazines, and fabrics from curtains, clothes, or bedding away from space heaters, radiators, and fireplaces.
- Heaters should be at least 3 feet from anything flammable.

Be careful in the kitchen: Did you know that cooking is the leading cause of home fires in the United States? The kitchen is rife with ways for a fire to start: food left unsupervised on a stove or in an oven or microwave; grease spills; a dish towel too close to the burner; a toaster or toaster oven flare-up; a coffee pot accidentally left on. Always supervise your child while cooking, and make sure to practice safe cooking habits - like turning all pot handles in so they can't be accidentally knocked over and not wearing loose-fitting clothing that could catch fire around the stove.

Check out the fireplace: Fireplaces should be kept clean and covered with a screen to keep sparks from jumping out. Only wood should be burned in the fireplace - paper and other materials can escape while burning and ignite nearby items. Never leave a fire burning unattended, and make sure a fire is completely extinguished before leaving the house or going to bed. Have the chimney professionally cleaned once a year.

Beware of cigarettes: According to the National Fire Prevention Association (NFPA), cigarettes are the number-one cause of fire deaths in the United States and Canada, killing about 1,000 people per year. Most are started when ashes or butts fall into couches and chairs. If you smoke, be especially careful around upholstered furniture, never smoke in bed, and be sure cigarettes are completely out before you toss them into the trash.

Never let your child play with matches and lighters: You've heard it again and again, but children playing with matches are still the leading cause of fire-related deaths and injuries for kids younger than 5. Always keep matches and lighters out of children's reach. Store flammable materials such as gasoline, kerosene and cleaning supplies outside of your home and away from children.

Use candles safely: As decorative candles have become more popular, candle fires have been on the rise. If you light candles, keep them out of reach of children and pets, away from curtains and furniture, and extinguish them before you go to bed. Make sure candles are in sturdy holders that won't tip over and are made of non-flammable material. Don't let older children and teens use candles unsupervised in their rooms.

Be aware of holiday dangers: Around the holidays, there are even more potential fire hazards to think about. If you use a real Christmas tree in your home, make sure to water it daily - electric lights strung on a dried-out tree are a recipe for disaster. All lights and lighted window ornaments should be inspected every year to make sure to be sure cords are not worn or frayed, and all candles should be used with care. According to the NFPA, the number of fires started by candles nearly doubles during the month of December

Household Tips

Make sure all smoke alarms are in working order: It's a fact - having a smoke alarm in the house cuts your risk of dying in a fire in half. If your home doesn't have smoke alarms, now is the time to install them on every level of your home and in each bedroom. If possible, choose one with a 10-year lithium battery. If your smoke alarm uses regular batteries, remember to replace them every year (hint: change your batteries when you change your clock in the fall). Test your smoke alarms monthly, and be sure your children are familiar with the sound of the alarm. Almost 60% of all fatal residential fires occur in homes that don't have smoke alarms, so this may be the single most important thing you can do to keep your family safe from fires.

Because smoke rises, smoke detectors should always be placed on ceilings or high on walls. If a smoke detector near the kitchen goes off while you're cooking, do not take the battery out of it - you may forget to replace it. Open the doors and windows instead. Or you might consider installing a rate-of-rise heat detector for places like the kitchen, where smoke or steam from cooking are likely to cause false alarms. These alarms can sense when the temperature reaches a set critical point, or when it rises by more than a certain number of degrees a minute.

If you're having a new home built or remodeling an older home, you may also want to consider adding a home sprinkler system. These are already found in many apartment buildings and dormitories.

Keep fire extinguishers handy: Be prepared for any accidents by having fire extinguishers strategically placed around your house - at least one on each floor and in the kitchen (this one should be an all-purpose extinguisher, meaning it can be used on grease and electrical fires), the basement, the garage, or workshop area. Keep them out of reach of children.

Fire extinguishers are best used when a fire is contained in a small area, like a wastebasket, and when the fire department has already been called. According to the NFPA, remember the word PASS when operating an extinguisher:

- **P**ull the pin. Release the lock with the nozzle pointing away from you.
- **A**im low. Point the extinguisher at the base of the fire.
- **S**queeze the lever slowly and evenly.
- **S**weep the nozzle from side to side.

The best time to learn how to use the fire extinguisher is now, before you ever need it (if you have any questions, the local fire department can help). Fire extinguishers have gauges on them indicating when they need to be replaced and should be checked regularly to make sure they are still functional.

If you're ever in doubt about whether to use an extinguisher on a fire, don't try it. Instead, leave the house immediately and call the fire department.

Plan escape routes: Planned escape routes are a necessity, especially if a fire were to occur during the night. Go through each room in your house and think about the possible exits. You should have in your mind two escape routes from each room, in case one is blocked by fire. Inspect the room to make sure that furniture and other objects are not blocking doorways or windows. Make sure that the windows in every room are easy to open and are not painted over or nailed shut - remember, these may be your only way out in a fire. If you live in an apartment building, make sure any safety bars on windows are removable in an emergency. Be sure to know the locations of the closest stairwells or fire escapes and where they lead.

If your house is more than one story tall or if you live above the ground floor of an apartment building, an escape ladder is an important safety feature. You should have one escape ladder made of fire-safe material (aluminum, not rope) in each upper-story bedroom that is occupied by a person who is capable of using it. Like fire extinguishers, escape ladders should be operated by adults only. The ladder must be approved by an independent testing laboratory; its length must be appropriate for your home, and it must support the weight of the heaviest adult in the house.

Be sure any babysitters in your home know all escape routes and plans in case of a fire.

Teach children the facts about fire: Unfortunately, many children will try to hide from a fire, often in a closet, under a bed, or in a corner. But if taught basic fire facts, children would be better able to protect themselves. Teach your child that

fires spread quickly, that most fire-related deaths are not from burns but from smoke inhalation, and that dangerous fumes can overcome a person in just a few minutes. Children should learn to:

- Cover their mouths and noses with a moist towel or an article of clothing to keep out dangerous fumes while evacuating.
- Crawl under the smoke to safety, staying as low to the ground as possible (smoke always rises).
- Touch any door (not the doorknob) to see if it is hot, and if it is, not to open it - find another exit.
- Locate the nearest stairway marked "Fire Exit" if they live in an apartment building or a fire escape if the stairway isn't accessible. Children should know to always avoid elevators during a fire.
- Never stop to take personal belongings or pets or to make a phone call (even to 911) while evacuating.
- Never go back into a burning building once safely outside.
- Stop, drop, and roll to extinguish flames if an article of clothing catches on fire.

Children should also always be dressed for bed in flame-retardant sleepwear.

Practice fire drills at home: Kids have fire drills at school and adults have them at work. Why shouldn't you have them at home, too? Fires are frightening and can cause panic. By rehearsing different scenarios, your family will be less likely to waste precious time trying to figure out what to do. Discuss and rehearse the escape routes you've planned for each room of your home. Designate a meeting place outside your house or apartment building that is a safe distance away (a mailbox, a fence, or even a distinctive-looking tree will do), where everyone can be accounted for after they escape.

Then, every so often, test your plan. Use your finger to set off the smoke detector and let everyone know it's time for a fire drill. See if everyone can evacuate your home and gather outside within 3 minutes - the time it can take for an entire house to go up in flames.

Being prepared is the best way to protect your family from a fire. So know the rules of fire prevention, stock your home with fire-safety items, and make sure your kids know what to do in a fire. A few minutes of planning now may save lives later on.