

# Fire Prevention

GUIDE



# Smoke Alarm 101

Smoke alarms cut the risk of dying in a house fire in half.

Whether hardwired into your home or battery-powered, these devices sense smoke or invisible combustion gases in the air. Some models may even register temperature changes. Smoke alarms can detect both smoldering and flaming fires. Keep reading to learn more about smoke alarms and how to keep your family safe.

## WHERE TO PLACE SMOKE ALARMS

In new homes, the National Fire Alarm Code requires hardwired, interconnected smoke alarms with battery back-ups on each level of the home and outside of each bedroom or sleeping area. Some combustion gases may cause you to drift into an even heavier sleep. That's why you put alarms outside each bedroom or sleeping area. Interconnected alarms mean that if one alarm detects a fire and goes off, they all go off, alerting everyone in the home.

If your home is already built, consider installing alarms at least in the above-listed places. Sometimes, you can get them installed along with a home security system that will alert someone if you're not home.

## MAINTAINING SMOKE ALARMS

Once you've got your smoke



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alarms installed, it's time to keep them well maintained so they keep you alive. If you get frequent nuisance alarms, use the alarm's hush button instead of disabling it. Consider moving them or switching to a different alarm if it keeps going off improperly.

You should also test your smoke alarms regularly, not by starting a fire, but by using

the test button. The American Red Cross suggests monthly tests. If your alarm's instructions permit the use of an aerosol smoke product for testing the alarm, choose one that has been tested by a product testing laboratory and use it according to package directions. Also on a monthly schedule, clean and vacuum dust and cobwebs

from your alarm. This can prevent nuisance alarms and keep them functioning at their best.

Every year, the Red Cross recommends replacing the batteries in your smoke alarms. Some agencies suggest changing the batteries when the time changes as a mnemonic device — change the time, change your batter-

ies — and that won't hurt, either.

Even if your alarms are hardwired, you still need to replace the back-up batteries.

You should replace the entire alarm every 10 years, even if they're still working. If you can't afford a smoke alarm, many local agencies and fire departments have free ones available.

# Make a Fire Escape Plan

In the middle of the night, when those smoke alarms howl, your family should know what to do immediately.

To get your family ready, start practicing fire drills — just like at school and work — before you hear the piercing wail of the alarms. The American Red Cross suggests holding family fire drills at least twice a year. Here's a few things you should think about when making your plan.

## TWO WAYS OUT

Every person should have two ways to get out of every room in your home. Think door and window. If you have second-story windows, make sure those rooms have easily accessible fire escape ladders and that everyone knows how to use them. It may be helpful to draw a map of your house to show everyone, especially children, and have them practice the routes.

While getting out, family members should stay low, keeping below the smoke. That's where breathable air is. Staying upright and in the smoke, you run the risk of not getting enough oxygen and passing out or, even worse, suffocating.

## HAVE A MEETING PLACE

The Red Cross says you may have as little as two min-



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utes to get out of your burning home. Practice getting everyone out and to a central meeting place — the mailbox, a neighbor's driveway, a nearby street sign, a tree — in under two minutes. Your meeting place should be far enough from your home that you're not in any danger from falling cinders or debris. Wait

to call 911 until you're at the meeting place.

## HAVE A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

You should also have a family emergency communications plan, the Red Cross says, to make sure household members know who to contact if they can't find some-

one or for help.

Each household member, even children, should know how to call 911 and give the dispatcher pertinent information calmly, like their name and address.

## NEVER GO BACK IN

Not for people, pets or things. Once you're out, stay

out. Tell the firefighters who is missing and let the professionals help them. If your clothes catch on fire on your way out, remember to stop, drop and roll once you're safely away from the fire. Rolling deprives the fire of oxygen it needs to spread, smothering it out. Running will only fan the flames.

# Keeping Pets and Animals Safe

Our animals are also members of our family. The best way to keep them safe in case of a house fire is to include them in your fire escape and safety plans. Follow these tips from the American Red Cross.

## STOP PETS FROM STARTING FIRES

The National Fire Protection Association says that almost 1,000 home fires each year are accidentally started by a family's pets. Pets are curious creatures and will want to investigate cook appliances, candles and any other open flame in your house. Make sure your pets aren't left unattended around an open flame — leaving an open flame unattended is a bad idea, anyway.

If you've got large animals that can potentially reach your stove and oven knobs, consider installing child locks or removing the knobs while you're gone. If you've got young pets, the most curious kind, make sure to keep an eye on them or, if you're not home, secure them in a kennel.

## PUT PETS INTO YOUR PLAN

Remember your furry friends when you're making your fire escape plan. Each



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pet should have their own disaster supplies kit, including food and medications, and a safe place to stay if your family can't go home. Make these arrangements before hand and have them written down in your pets disaster kit.

When you practice your escape plan, remember to

grab your pet. Train them to come when called and keep a leash by the door. Your pets should also wear a collar with tags identifying their family in case they escape their own way. But remember, never delay escape or endanger yourself or your family to rescue a wayward pet.

## HELP FIREFIGHTERS HELP YOUR PETS

Never go back into a burning house to rescue your pet. Instead, prepare ahead of time to help the professionals get to them safely. When you're away from home, kennel or keep your pets near entrances to your home.

Make sure your pets have a collar and tags with identifying information.

Put a pet alert window cling on the front window or door of your home. Write down how many pets and their names to save rescuers time when locating your pets. Keep the cling updated regularly.

# Cooking Up Fire Safety

The National Fire Protection Association says that a little more than half of residential fires started with cooking, making it the No. 1 cause of home fires and home fire injuries.

“We know cooking fires can be prevented,” said Lorraine Carli, the NFPA vice president of outreach and advocacy. “Staying in the kitchen, using a timer and avoiding distractions such as electronics or TV are steps everyone can take to keep families safe in their homes.”

Here are some tips from the NFPA on staying safe when cooking food.

- Never leave cooking food unattended. Stay in the kitchen whenever you’re cooking and, if you leave, turn the stove off.

- Supervise children when they’re using a microwave oven.

- If you’re using a long cooking method, such as simmering, baking, roasting or boiling food, check it regularly and stay at home while it’s cooking. Use a timer to remind you to check it often.

- Don’t start cooking if you’re sleepy, have taken medicine or drugs, or if you’ve consumed alcohol. That increases the risk that you will doze off while cooking, and



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that could lead to a fire.

- Only use dishes labeled microwave-safe in your microwave oven.

- Keep an oven mitt and a pan lid nearby while you’re cooking. If a grease fire starts, use the lid to smother the flame. Turn off the burner and leave the affected pan covered

until it’s cooled down.

- Establish a kid-free zone at least three feet around the stove and areas where you’re cooking.

- When you’re cooking, avoid loose-fitting clothing that may trail into stove burners and catch fire.

- Keep anything flammable

— dish towels, mail, food packaging — away from the stove area.

- Never use your stove or oven to heat your home.

- Don’t use an extension cord for microwaves or other kitchen appliances.

- In case of an oven fire, turn off the heat and keep the

door closed until the fire cools down. Opening the oven will give the fire more oxygen and possibly more fuel.

- Check the temperature of food before giving it to children to prevent burns. If food was heated in the microwave, stir it to evenly distributed heat.

# What to Do after a Fire

The worst has happened. A fire broke out in your home and you're trying to pick up the pieces. You may be wondering what to do. We're here to help. Here are some tips for recovering from a residential fire from the American Red Cross.

## IMMEDIATELY AFTER

If you haven't, call 911 to report the fire and get it out. Then, call friends and family — no matter the time — and tell them you're safe. If you have burns or if your family or pets are burned, seek medical or veterinary attention immediately. Burns are easily infected and need professional attention.

No matter how badly you want to get back to your home and look for items that may have made it through the fire unscathed, stay out until officials tell you it's OK to return. Structure fires frequently have hot spots and smoldering areas for days after it appears the fire is out.

## TAKE CARE EMOTIONALLY

A fire doesn't just take a toll on your physical possessions and health, it can be devastating mentally. Remember to pace yourself and try to



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remain calm. Try to stick to your family routines as much as possible and get plenty of rest. Accept help from others, even strangers, and ask if you need anything. Recovery can take time for everyone involved, so stay close to your family and support systems as you go through this trying time.

## TAKE CARE FINANCIALLY

Contact your insurance agent or company as soon as you can. Provide a general description of what happened and how much damage you suffered. Prepare a list, if you can, of damaged items and provide receipts if possible. Also keep receipts for any additional expenses you may

incur because of the fire, such as for lodging, repairs and cleaning supplies. Make copies of everything you send to your claims adjuster or insurance company.

You may also need to replace some vital documents lost in the fire. These could include your driver's license or other government-issued

ID; insurance policies and paperwork; military discharge papers; passports; birth, death and marriage certificates; Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid cards; credit or debit cards; titles to deeds; stocks and bonds; wills; income tax records; citizenship papers and mortgage papers.

# Cleaning Up after a Fire

Many people want to get back to their home as soon as possible to start cleaning up and begin the recovery process.

But slow down, you need to wait until the investigation of the fire, if there is one, is complete and authorities have made the home safe to enter. Once that happens, here are some things to watch out for when you're cleaning up, according to the American Red Cross.

## STRUCTURAL DAMAGE

Look for loose power lines, foundation cracks, damaged utility lines — especially gas lines and damage to the main support structure of your home. If you're unsure of what you're looking at, have a contractor or building inspector check the property out with you. Don't shove or force doors and fallen walls as it may be holding up the remnants of the home.

If you can get in, make sure to wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, closed toe shoes or boots with rubber soles and sturdy work gloves. You may also want to wear dust masks and safety goggles or a hard hat. The last thing you want to deal with right now is an injury.

## INSIDE THE HOME

As you move around your home, sniff for the smell of



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gas. If you smell gas or hear a hissing sound, leave immediately and call a professional. Look for smoke and embers around the property, including in the attic. Put out any hot spots you find. Remember that both the structure or your home furnishings may be unstable in ways you can't see immediately.

Be careful as you move around and move objects. Document damage before you start cleaning out and cleaning up.

## REMOVING SMOKE ODORS

To remove smoke odors from fabrics and clothing, choose a product specifically designed for that purpose. The Red Cross recommends one that contains tri-sodium phosphate, a common but caustic cleaning agent. You can also, the organization says, wash clothes with your usual detergent and one tablespoon of pure vanilla extract. This solution can remove smoke odors on

kitchen surfaces and washable furniture.

Getting soot and smoke out of walls and floors can be harder. Use a mild soap or detergent or mix four to six tablespoons of tri-sodium phosphate with a cup of household cleaner or chlorine bleach to every gallon of water. Wear rubber gloves and get cleaning. Rinse anything you clean with this solution well with clean water.

Pots, pans and other kitchen utensils can be cleaned

with soap, water and polished with a fine-powdered cleaner. Leather goods can be cleaned with a damp cloth then rubbed with a dry cloth until clean.

If your drywall has been soaked by fire hoses, consult a professional about replacing and repairing it. If you're using professionals for the rebuilding process, make sure they follow the appropriate building codes for your area and that they are appropriately licensed and insured.

# How to Use a Fire Extinguisher

Fire extinguishers can be useful for putting out small fires in the home, particularly in the kitchen. Do you have a fire extinguisher in your home? Do you know how to use it?



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Keep reading to learn about extinguishers from the American Red Cross.

## SHOULD I HAVE AN EXTINGUISHER?

Yes, you should. At least one. Consider keeping a fire extinguisher in every cooking area in your home. This extinguisher should be rated A-B-C. Many extinguishers for home use can only be used once and are not rechargeable. Fire extinguishers

should be easily accessible to adults — not children — and kept near exits and away from extreme temperatures.

Routinely check that your extinguisher is properly charged by using the gauge or test button to check the pressure. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for replacing and recharging fire extinguishers. Also look for damage or corrosion and replace the extinguisher if you find any.

## HOW DO I USE AN EXTINGUISHER?

There are instructions on the side, of course, but be realistic about your ability to read, comprehend and execute those during an emergency. Instead, get training from your local fire department or the extinguisher's manufacturer on how to use your fire extinguisher before a fire breaks out. Remember that different models of extinguishers have different oper-

ating instructions, so get acquainted with your extinguishers, even if you've had training before. Only adults should handle and use fire extinguishers.

Before you begin to fight a fire with an extinguisher, make sure everyone has left or is leaving home. Call the fire department and make sure you have a quick exit at your back. Only use fire extinguishers on small fires that aren't spreading, and make

sure there's only a little smoke in the room so that you have clean air to breathe.

To use your extinguisher, point it low, at the base of the fire. Squeeze the lever slowly and evenly, then sweep the nozzle from side to side over the flames. If you try to use a fire extinguisher on a fire and it doesn't immediately die down, drop the extinguisher and get out. Most portable fire extinguishers only last about eight seconds.