

I.6 HOME FIRES

About Fire Safety & Prevention

The most effective way to protect yourself and your home from fire is to identify and remove fire hazards. 65 percent of house fire deaths occur in homes with no working smoke alarms. During a home fire, working smoke alarms and a fire escape plan that has been practiced regularly can save lives.

Be Red Cross Ready

- If a fire occurs in your home, GET OUT, STAY OUT and CALL for help.
- Install smoke alarms on every level of your home, inside bedrooms and outside sleeping areas. Test them every month and replace the batteries at least once a year.
- Talk with all household members about a fire escape plan and practice the plan twice a year.

PREPARE:

- Keep items that can catch on fire at least three feet away from anything that gets hot, such as space heaters.
- Never smoke in bed.
- Talk to your children regularly about the dangers of fire, matches and lighters and keep them out of reach.
- Turn portable heaters off when you leave the room or go to sleep.

Smoke Alarms

- Install smoke alarms on every level of your home, inside bedrooms and outside sleeping areas.
- Teach your children what smoke alarms sound like and what to do when they hear one.
- Once a month check whether each alarm in the home is working properly by pushing the test button.
- Replace batteries in smoke alarms at least once a year. Immediately install a new battery if an alarm chirps, warning the battery is low.
- Smoke alarms should be replaced every 10 years. Never disable smoke or carbon monoxide alarms.
- Carbon monoxide alarms are not substitutes for smoke alarms. Know the difference between the sound of smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms.

Fire Escape Planning

- Ensure that all household members know two ways to escape from every room of your home.
- Make sure everyone knows where to meet outside in case of fire.
- Practice escaping from your home at least twice a year and at different times of the day. Practice waking up to smoke alarms, low crawling and meeting outside. Make sure everyone knows how to call 9-1-1.
- Teach household members to STOP, DROP and ROLL if their clothes should catch on fire.

Cooking Safely

- Stay in the kitchen when frying, grilling or broiling food. If you leave the kitchen, even for a short period of time, turn off the stove.
- Stay in the home while simmering, baking, roasting or boiling food. Check it regularly and use a timer to remind you that food is cooking.
- Keep anything that can catch fire—like pot holders, towels, plastic and clothing—away from the stove.
- Keep pets off cooking surfaces and countertops to prevent them from knocking things onto the burner.

Caution: Carbon Monoxide Kills

- Install carbon monoxide alarms in central locations on every level of your home and outside sleeping areas.
- If the carbon monoxide alarm sounds, move quickly to a fresh air location outdoors or by an open window or door.
- Never use a generator, grill, camp stove or other gasoline, propane, natural gas or charcoal-burning devices inside a home, garage, basement, crawlspace or any partially enclosed area.

RESPOND DURING:

Follow Your Escape Plan

During a home fire, remember to GET OUT, STAY OUT and CALL 9-1-1 or your local emergency phone number.

- If closed doors or handles are warm, use your second way out. Never open doors that are warm to the touch.
- Crawl low under smoke.
- Go to your outside meeting place and then call for help.



- If smoke, heat or flames block your exit routes, stay in the room with doors closed. Place a wet towel under the door and call the fire department or 9-1-1. Open a window and wave a brightly colored cloth or flashlight to signal for help.

Use Caution with Fire Extinguishers

Use a portable fire extinguisher ONLY if you have been trained by the fire department and in the following conditions:

- The fire is confined to a small area, and is not growing.
- The room is not filled with smoke.
- Everyone has exited the building.
- The fire department has been called.

Remember the word PASS when using a fire extinguisher:

P – Pull the pin and hold the extinguisher with the nozzle pointing away from you.

A – Aim low. Point the extinguisher at the base of the fire.

S – Squeeze the lever slowly and evenly.

S – Sweep the nozzle from side to side.

RECOVER AFTER:

Immediately After a House Fire

- Have injuries treated by a medical professional. Wash small wounds with soap and water. To help prevent infection of small wounds, use bandages and replace them if they become soiled, damaged or waterlogged.
- Remain calm. Pace yourself. You may find yourself in the position of taking charge of other people. Listen carefully to what people are telling you, and deal patiently with urgent situations first.
- Check with the fire department to make sure your residence is safe to enter.
- Anyone entering your damaged home should wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, closed-toed rubber-soled shoes or boots and work gloves, plus dust masks, safety goggles and/or a hard hat when necessary.

Checking Your Home after a Fire

Taking the Appropriate Steps to Stay Safe

Do not cut or walk past colored tape that was placed over doors or windows to mark damaged areas unless local authorities advise that it is safe to do so. If a building inspector has placed a color-coded sign on the home, do not enter it until you get

more information, advice and instructions about what the sign means and whether it is safe to enter your home.

If you have children, leave them with a relative or friend while you conduct your first inspection of your home after the fire. The site may be unsafe for children, and seeing the damage firsthand may upset them and cause long-term effects, including nightmares.

Checking for Structural Damage

- Check the outside of your home before you enter. Look for loose power lines, broken or damaged gas lines, foundation cracks, missing support beams or other damage. Damage on the outside can indicate a serious problem inside. Ask a building inspector or contractor to check the structure before you enter.
- If the door is jammed, don't force it open – it may be providing support to the rest of your home. Find another way to get inside.
- Damaged locks should be taken apart and wiped with oil. If locks can't be removed, squirt machine oil through a bolt opening or keyhole, and work the knob to distribute the oil. Hinges should also be thoroughly cleaned and oiled.
- Sniff for gas. If you detect natural or propane gas, or hear a hissing noise, leave the property immediately and get well away from it. Call the fire department after you reach safety.
- If you have a propane tank system, turn off all valves and contact a propane supplier to check the system out before you use it again.
- Check for smoke and embers throughout the home, including the attic.
- Beware of animals, such as rodents, snakes, spiders and insects, that may have entered your home. As you inspect your home, tap loudly and often on the floor with a stick to give notice that you are there.
- Damaged objects, such as furniture or stairs, may be unstable. Be very cautious when moving near them. Avoid holding, pushing or leaning against damaged building parts.
- Is your ceiling sagging? That means it got wet – which makes it heavy and dangerous. It will have to be replaced, so you can try to knock it down. Be careful: wear eye protection and a hard hat, use a long stick, and stand well away from the damaged area. Poke holes in the ceiling starting from the outside of the bulge to let any water drain out slowly. Striking the center of the damaged area may cause the whole ceiling to collapse.
- Is the floor sagging? It could collapse under your weight, so don't walk there! Small sections that are sagging can be bridged by thick plywood panels or thick, strong boards that extend at least 8–12 inches on each side of the sagging area.
- If the weather is dry, open windows and doors to ventilate and dry your home.
- If power is out, use a flashlight. Do not use any open flame, including candles, to inspect for damage or serve as alternate lighting.
- Disconnect and check all appliances for water damage before using them.
- Make temporary repairs such as covering holes, bracing walls, and removing debris. Save all receipts.
- Take photographs of the damage. You may need these to substantiate insurance claims later.

Checking Utilities and Major Systems

Telephones

- Check each telephone to see if it is still on the hook. Hang up any phones that aren't. Wait a few minutes, and then pick up one phone to listen for a dial tone to know whether you have working telephone service.
- If you don't have a dial tone, try unplugging all the phones. Plug in one at a time and listen for dial tone. This will help you determine if the phone itself is broken or the service is completely out. If it is, contact the telephone company to report the problem and request repair.

Electrical, Plumbing and Heating Systems

- If you see sparks, broken or frayed wires, or if you smell hot insulation, turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker.
- If there is a pool of water on the floor between you and the fuse box or circuit breaker panel, use a dry wooden stick to try to reach to turn off the main fuse or breaker, but do not step or stand in water to do that. If you cannot reach the fuse box or breaker panel, call a qualified electrician for assistance.
- Inspect the panel box for any breakers that may have tripped. A tripped breaker may indicate damaged wiring inside your home. Do not turn them on. Call an electrician.
- Use a flashlight to inspect fuses. Replace broken fuses with exactly the same amperage rating and never use an object such as a coin or strip of metal to bypass the protection that fuses provide.
- If you suspect sewage lines are damaged, avoid using sinks, showers or toilets and call a plumber.
- If water pipes are damaged, turn off the water at the main valve. Call a plumber for assistance.
- If you have a heating oil tank system, turn off all valves and contact a professional specializing in maintenance of such equipment before using it again.

Checking Household Items

- Normal household items, such as cleaning products, can cause toxic fumes and other hazards if they mix. See our household chemical safety tips.
- Spilled chemicals that don't pose a health risk must still be carefully cleaned up. Wear rubber gloves and discard spilled chemicals and rags used for cleaning according to the advice of local authorities.
- Throw away food, beverages and medicine exposed to heat, smoke or soot. Food that was in the freezer can be used if it still has ice crystals on it. If not, discard it.

Cleaning Up after a fire and removing odour

- Products containing tri-sodium phosphate (TSP) can reduce odors in fabrics. TSP is caustic so be careful! Read the label for directions and safety instructions.

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- Test garments before using any treatment, and follow the manufacturer's instructions. Smoke odor and soot can sometimes be washed from clothing that can be bleached. Measure 4 to 6 tbsp. Tri-Sodium Phosphate and 1 cup household cleaner or chlorine bleach for every gallon of warm water you will use. Alternatively, consider washing clothes in cold water with your usual household laundry detergent, and adding one tablespoon of pure vanilla extract.
- To remove soot and smoke from walls, furniture and floors, use a mild soap or detergent or mix together 4 to 6 tbsp. tri-sodium phosphate and 1 cup household cleaner or chlorine bleach to every gallon of warm water. Wear rubber gloves. Be sure to rinse surfaces with clear warm water and dry thoroughly.
- Wash walls one small area at a time, working from the floor up to prevent streaking. Rinse with clear water immediately. Ceilings should be washed last. Do not repaint until walls and ceilings are completely dry. Reduce the chances of growth of mold and mildew by wiping down all surfaces that had gotten wet with a solution of one cup of liquid household bleach to a gallon of water. (Test surfaces to ensure that the bleach solution will not discolor these surfaces. To conduct this test, wipe a small area of the surface with the bleach solution, and allow it to dry at least 24 hours.)
- Washable wallpaper can be cleansed like painted walls, but do not wet through the paper. Use a commercial paste to repaste any loose edges or sections.
- Consult a professional about replacing drywall and insulation that has been soaked by water from fire hoses. It can not be dried out and maintain structural integrity or resistance to mold and mildew.
- Pots, pans, flatware, etc., should be washed with soapy water, rinsed and then polished.
- Wipe leather goods with a damp cloth, then a dry cloth. Stuff purses and shoes with newspaper to retain shape. Leave suitcases open. Leather goods should be dried away from heat and sun. When leather goods are dry, clean with saddle soap. Rinse leather and suede jackets in cold water and dry away from heat and sun.

