

House and Building Fires

Toolbox Talk

A fire can engulf a structure in a matter of minutes. Understanding the basic characteristics of fire and learning the proper safety practices can be the key to surviving a house or building fire.

BEFORE A FIRE OCCURS

Preventative steps are the best way to deal with fires – they can prevent fires from happening in the first place, or provide you with an early alert to give you the most time to respond.

Install smoke detectors – check them once a month and change the batteries at least once per year.

Develop and practice an escape plan – make sure all individuals know what to do in the event of a fire. Some considerations when developing an escape plan are:

- Draw a floor plan with at least two ways of escaping every room, then choose a safe meeting place outside the building.
- Practice alerting other employees – it's a good idea to keep a bell and a flashlight in each area of the building for this purpose.
- Practice evacuating the building blindfolded – in a real fire situation, the amount of smoke generated by a fire may make it impossible to see.
- Practice staying low to the ground when escaping.
- Feel all doors with the back of your hand before opening them – if the door is hot, do not open it; find another way to escape.
- Learn to stop, drop to the ground, and roll if your clothes catch fire.
- Consider safe egress strategies for physically handicapped employees – make sure they have a way to escape when the elevators are stopped and they are unable to get down the stairs on their own.

Post emergency numbers near telephones. However, be aware that if a fire threatens your building, you should not place the call to your emergency services from inside the building. It is better to get out first, then call when you're in a safe space.

Purchase collapsible ladders at hardware stores if you are in a multiple story building or home, and practice using them.

Install A-B-C type fire extinguishers in designated areas of the building and teach employees how to use them. The appropriate fire extinguisher should be used to control a small area that will open a path of egress, or exit.

Do not store combustible materials in closed areas or near a heat source.

Electrical Wiring

- Replace wiring if frayed or cracked.
- Make sure wiring is not under rugs, over nails, or in high traffic areas
- Do not overload outlets or extension cords.
- Outlets should have cover plates and no exposed wiring.
- Only purchase appliances and electrical devices that have a label indicating that they have been inspected by a testing laboratory.

Cooking

- Keep the stove area clean and clear of combustibles, such as bags, boxes, and other appliances.
- If a fire starts, put a lid over the burning pan or use an appropriate fire extinguisher. Moving the pan can cause the fire to spread.
- Never pour water on grease fires.

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DURING A FIRE

If you find yourself in a situation where a fire has broken out, do your best to remember the escape plan developed for your safe egress. Keep in mind:

- Get out as quickly and as safely as possible.
- Use the stairs to escape – never try to use an elevator.
- When evacuating, stay low to the ground.
- If possible, cover mouth with a cloth to avoid inhalation of smoke and gases.
- Close doors to each room you leave or pass to delay the spread of the fire.

Enclosed Rooms

If you find yourself in a room with a closed door when a fire breaks out:

- If smoke is pouring in around the bottom of the door, or the door feels hot, keep the door closed.
- Open a window to escape or to provide you with fresh air while awaiting rescue.
- If there is no smoke around the door and the door is not hot when you feel it with the back of your hand, open the door slowly – a quick movement could pull oxygen and fire into the room from the hallway.
- If there is too much smoke or fire in the hall, slam the door shut, using the air's force to push the fire and smoke away from the doorway.

Once you have safely escaped, then call the fire department from a location outside the building.

AFTER A FIRE HAS OCCURRED

- Give first aid where appropriate.
- Seriously injured or burned victims should be transported to professional medical help immediately.
- Stay out of damaged buildings.
- Return home or to the building only when local fire authorities announce it is safe to be re-entered.
- Watch for structural damage.
- Discard food that has been exposed to heat, smoke, and/or soot.
- Contact your insurance agent.
- Don't discard damaged goods until after an inventory has been taken; save receipts for money spent relating to fire loss.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Heating Devices

Heating devices, such as portable heaters, wood stoves, and fireplaces, demand safe operation. Only use portable heaters in well-ventilated rooms. Refuel kerosene heaters outdoors only. Have chimneys and wood stoves cleaned annually. Buy only approved heaters and follow the manufacturer's directions.

Smoke Detectors

Smoke detectors more than double the chance of surviving a fire. They sense abnormal amounts of smoke or invisible combustion gases in the air and can detect both smoldering and burning fires. At least one smoke detector should be installed on every level of a structure. Test the smoke detectors each month and replace the batteries at least once per year.

