

# Escaping a Home Fire

You wake up to the sound of a smoke alarm blaring. You try to see where you're going, but it's pitch-dark. You feel as if you're blindfolded. Panic takes over your body and mind—you're having trouble breathing. You need help, and only precious seconds are left. What must you do?

Knowing the answer to this question before a fire starts can mean the difference between life and death. According to the National Safety Council, about 4,200 people die and 25,000 are injured in fires each year. Property losses from fire exceed \$8.5 billion a year. Even though you may not be a trained firefighter, you can do a lot to survive what has become the second leading cause of death in the home.

A fire is a harrowing experience. A room can fill quickly with dense, black smoke, and it can get so dark you may not be able to see your hand in front of your face. In 30 seconds, a small fire can get out of control, and, in two minutes, a room can become life-threatening. In only five minutes, flames can engulf an entire house.

Most victims die before the flames ever reach them. Poisonous smoke and gas can make them lose consciousness in less than two minutes. Heat even can be more hazardous to victims than the flames. The air can become so hot it will scorch your lungs and melt clothing to your skin.



# How To Escape Fires

Be aware that most home fires occur between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Install UL- or FM-labeled smoke detectors that sense smoke and sound an alarm to awaken you in time to escape. Place detectors on the ceiling or high on walls outside bedroom areas as outlined in the manufacturer's instructions. Each level of a home needs a battery-powered smoke detector. Replace the batteries annually.

Get your family together and discuss escape plans. Once you have a plan, hold practice drills. Be sure to have a main and alternate exit for each room. If you live in an apartment building, leave elevators out of your escape plan. Use the stairs,

instead. If smoke or fire is blocking your path, go to the roof, provided it's accessible in an emergency. Specify a place to meet outside, such as a tree or other landmark, to ensure everyone escapes safely.

Pay special attention to children during fires (the leading cause of their accidental deaths in the home). Children often become afraid and hide under beds or in closets, making it difficult for rescue workers to find them.

Also pay close attention to older persons. More than 1,300 adults over the age of 65 die in fires every year. Disabled and older adults should have a phone by their bed so they can call for help.

## Escaping Without Injury

If a fire does break out in your home, roll out of bed as soon as you hear the alarm, and, if smoke is in the room, drop to the floor. Make your way to the door and test the temperature with the back of your hand (as high up as you can reach). If the door feels cool, crack it open and check for smoke. If all is clear, follow your regular escape route. Test all doors and close them behind you.

If your first escape route is blocked, use an alternate plan. If you're on the first floor, you can climb out the window. On higher floors, if there's a balcony or roof outside your window, wait there. Have an escape ladder available to climb down from second- or third-story windows. Once outside, use a neighbor's phone to call the fire department. If you have a designated meeting spot, go there.

Everyone faces the threat of a home fire. That's why it's important to take the threat seriously and to know what to do before one ever starts. That's also why firefighters at Naval Air Station, Keflavik, Iceland, spent March 11 through March 22, 2002, going through 757 family quarters on base at pre-arranged times to inspect for fire hazards. They also checked and replaced batteries in smoke detectors and

indoctrinated people on how to keep their homes safe.

The firefighters found 150 fire hazards, including electrical problems in range hoods and kitchen stoves, defective door closures, and broken vent hoses. They reported these problems to the housing office's trouble desk. They passed other hazards, such as greasy filters in range hoods, improper storage of flammable liquids, overloaded electrical circuits, lint behind clothes dryers, and incorrect storage practices in common areas, to the occupants.

The firefighters found 462 battery-powered smoke detectors in good condition and only replaced the batteries. Forty-nine of the 1,440 electrical-powered detectors they checked, though, were defective and had to be repaired or replaced. ABC-type, dry-chemical fire extinguishers in the stairwells of multifamily condominiums also were inspected, and only one of 265 had to be replaced.

Why does NAS Keflavik pay so much attention to home-fire safety? Because the returns are fewer fires, which means fewer deaths and less property loss. ❏

*We thank the National Safety Council for much of the preceding information.—Ed.*