

Are You Prepared?

Fire is the one disaster for which most Americans feel prepared, according to a recent survey by the National Fire Protection Association. But are we?

One reason why 31 percent of respondents to the NFPA survey felt prepared for fire may be that most households are now equipped with smoke alarms. A separate NFPA report found that 24 out of 25 households with telephones (96%) have a smoke alarm.

But one in five of those alarms are not working. Households with non-working smoke alarms now outnumber those with no smoke alarms. Approximately 70% of home-fire fatalities occur in houses with no working smoke alarms.

Non-working smoke alarms most often have missing, dead, or disconnected batteries. A Consumer Product Safety Commission survey found that when batteries were removed or disconnected, the leading reason given was "nuisance" activations: the alarm sounded due to smoke from cooking or steam from showers.

Suggestions for dealing with "nuisance" activations:

1. Don't remove the battery. Instead, move the alarm to a more suitable location.
2. Purchase alarms with hush button feature.

Only a working smoke alarm can alert you to danger. What you do next is just as important as getting that warning. The NFPA also found that only one-fourth of those surveyed have developed and rehearsed a plan for escaping their home in a fire. And only 8 percent of those whose smoke alarms went off actually responded correctly -- by assuming there was a fire and leaving immediately. Each time we do not respond correctly, the incorrect behavior is reinforced especially in our children as they see us model the incorrect behavior.

To protect your family from fire:

1. Make sure your smoke alarm is working.
2. Make an exit plan.
 - Draw a floor plan of your home, including every floor.
 - Mark all windows and doors, label each bedroom, and note where smoke alarms are located (ideally on every level of your home, outside sleeping areas, and for added safety, in every room where people sleep).
 - Plan for two escape routes from every room, especially bedrooms. Include escape plans for anyone with special needs (Find the U.S. Fire Administration's Special Populations Fire-Safe Checklist at www.usfa.fema.gov/public/factsheets/safety.shtm).
 - Choose a family meeting spot a safe distance from your home, where everyone will gather and wait for the fire department.
 - Have the whole family discuss the escape route and the meeting place. Decide who will "monitor," and make sure everyone gets out.
3. PRACTICE your escape route at least twice a year.
 - Have everyone participate, and make sure everyone can unlock doors and windows quickly. Pretend that an exit is blocked, and practice alternative escape routes. Pretend the lights are out and practice finding a way out.

- Go over what to do if trapped in an upstairs bedroom: close the bedroom door, place a towel or blanket across the bottom of the door, and call for help from the window.
- Plan a drill at night when children are asleep (let everyone in the family know that a night drill is forthcoming).

4. Respond immediately if your smoke alarm activates. Every time the alarm activates it should be considered a call to action by all occupants, reminding them of what they have already discussed and practiced. Be sure everyone in your family knows never to go back into a burning building; if a family member or pet is missing you will tell the firefighters, who are equipped to perform rescues safely.

For more information about non-working smoke alarms and home fires visit:

www.firechief.com/current/.

© Fireproof Children/Prevention First 2004. One Grove Street, Suite 235. Pittsford, NY 14534

www.fireproofchildren.com