

Escaping a Fire

Begin With Prevention

Inspect the areas of your home that are most prone to fire: the kitchen, appliances and wiring, and heating system. Look for flammables near heat sources, worn cords, and poor ventilation of heat sources.

Install at least one smoke alarm on each level of your home and in the bedroom areas. Test alarms monthly. Change batteries twice a year.

Planning Makes a Difference

A fire in your home can bring tremendous loss, but it does not have to mean loss of life. A carefully thought-out escape plan ensures that your family will know what to do if fire strikes.

How much of a difference can planning make? Look at these examples:

- A house fire is not bright; it is pitch black. If you have practiced an exit plan many times, it will be automatic, even in dark smoke.
- The elderly or disabled may need help getting out of the house. With a good escape plan, someone will help them get out alive.
- Children under age 5 are twice as likely to die in a fire as other family members are. Plan in advance to help your little person escape, and make the odds a lot better.
- Children tend to panic in a fire. A common reaction is to hide from the flames. Children who know how to escape a fire won't be found dead in a closet or under a bed.

Anti-Panic Insurance

Maybe your family would know instantly what to do in a fire, but most people would panic. Make a careful plan as a family and practice it frequently. It's almost like anti-panic insurance. Fear may set in, but the plan will go into action and save your lives.

Plan Basics

Begin planning your safe escape by drawing a floor plan of your house. Every room should have two possible exits, usually a door and a window. Sketch in the shortest, safest way outside from any place in the home.

For second floor windows, consider trees, garages, or other structures that could either help someone exit or could get in the way. Fire-resistant escape ladders may be a good investment for second floor bedrooms.

Apartment buildings may have exit plans in the corridors showing how to get out of the building. Still, you need a plan for your own apartment. Your safest exit may not be down the building corridor; it may be out a window.

Choose a safe meeting place outside. Go there directly after exiting. Good choices include a neighbor's mailbox or a street sign – anything that doesn't move and is easy to recognize.

Make sure the exits you are counting on are easy to open. If you need the extra security of window bars, make sure yours are the quick-release, fire-safe type.

Make necessary adjustments. Either redraw your plan or make changes to your house.

Special Considerations

If anyone very young, elderly, or disabled lives with you, make arrangements in your escape plan.

- Assign one parent to get a small child.
- An elderly or disabled person should have a telephone in his room.
- Alert the fire department with a sign in the bedroom window of anyone who cannot exit alone.
- People with mobility problems should sleep on the ground floor, if possible.

Practice the Plan

Make your escape plan run like clockwork by practicing it thoroughly. Go through the plan with the entire family at least twice a year.

Practice at night and during the day, during warm weather and cold, wet weather. Different conditions can change how well the plan works.

Choose a responsible drill monitor. After the first drill, the monitor should make each practice a surprise.

- Practice when everyone is home.
- Rule out some exits with "smoke" or "flames" signs, so people must use backup exits.
- Sound the smoke alarm to start the drill.
- Try to escape safely in 3 to 5 minutes.

Safe Escape Tips

- About 75% of house fire deaths are caused by smoke, not by flames. You must crawl under smoke, with your head 12-24 inches above the floor.
- It takes 10-15 minutes to burn through a wooden door. Sleep with doors shut.
- Use the back of your hand to touch the door, doorknob, and hinges. If you feel heat, use your second exit; if you don't, open the door slowly. If you see thick smoke or flames, slam the door shut. Use another exit.
- If you are trapped, stuff clothing under the doors. Telephone the fire department to tell them your location. Wait at a window and signal with a flashlight or light-colored cloth.
- Never go back into a burning building for any reason!