



Fight Fire with Practice: Test your family's fire escape plan

Several times a year, communities nationwide wake to the news that a child has died in a fire. Fires are the third leading cause of fatal injuries overall and the 12th leading cause of nonfatal injuries to children younger than 14 years old, according to the National Safety Council. In 2004, 3,500 people died in home fires in the United States, the council reported.

Of course, prevention is the best medicine for protecting your family from fires. However, even the most careful families need to have a fire escape plan in case something goes wrong.

"Not having a plan is a deadly mistake," according to Wrightsville Beach, NC, Fire Chief Frank Smith. "Nothing could be more heartbreaking than to see a family suffering when the loss could have been easily prevented. You need a plan."

This is especially true considering how common fires are. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, a fire breaks out in an American home every 10 seconds, and every 60 seconds a fire occurs that is serious enough to require a fire department response.

BUILD YOUR PLAN

According to the Quincy, MA-based National Fire Protection Association, you and your family should begin the plan with a walk-through of your home. During the walk-through, identify all possible exits and escape routes. If your home has two floors, be sure every family member is able to escape from the second floor if necessary.

Afterward, draw a floor plan of your home. Mark two ways out of each room, including windows and doors. The plan also should mark the locations of smoke alarms.

The National Safety Council recommends having a smoke alarm on every level of your home, especially outside of sleeping areas. Families should test the alarms monthly and change the batteries every six months. The council recommends families involve children in smoke alarm testing so they become familiar with the sound of the alarm.

After drawing up your plan, NFPA suggests a second walkthrough, in which you test all doors and windows to make sure you can open them easily. If windows or doors have security bars, make sure they have quick-release mechanisms and every family member knows how to open them.

Family members, especially children, have to know where to go once they get outside, NFPA said. Designate a meeting place a safe distance away from the home and indicate that location on your floor plan. Make sure each family member – including small children – knows how to call 911.

Once everyone has escaped, make sure everyone stays outside. Under no circumstance should anyone re-enter a burning building. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, lack of oxygen on the way out may impair judgment, causing some people to try to go back inside the building.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Once you have designed a plan, you have to test it. A 2005 NFPA study found that one-third of Americans do not have an escape plan, and only 1 in 4 Americans has practiced putting their plan into action.



The U.S. Fire Administration recommends families conduct drills at least twice annually. According to USFA, during fires children may become frightened or confused and try to hide rather than escape. Firefighters often find children under beds or in closets, where they feel safe. Regular drills help children understand that when a fire starts, they must go outside.

"A fire drill in your apartment, condominium or house requires every family member to practice opening the doors and windows necessary to escape," said John Drengenberg, manager of consumer affairs for Underwriters Laboratories in Northbrook, IL. "It also means giving younger children permission to get out of the home on their own, even at night, when they hear the alarm."

When testing your plan, NFPA recommends family members crawl on their hands and knees. Because hot air and smoke rise, the safest air during a fire will be closer to the ground. Don't crawl on your bellies, but try to stay 1 or 2 feet above the floor. Some smoke-produced toxins can settle on floors, NFPA said.

During your escape drill, the National Safety Council recommends teaching all family members to check doors and the doorknob for heat before opening them.

After you and your children get the hang of exercising your plan a few times, try a nighttime drill. NFPA recommends telling children about the drill in advance; the objective is for them to practice, not to scare them.

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