

Smoke detectors key to saving lives

By Christina Hansen

For any family, safety is paramount – especially related to fire and carbon monoxide poisoning. With their proven ability to double a family’s chance of surviving a residential fire, smoke detectors are one of the most valuable fire safety tools on the market – yet we tend to take them for granted. And, carbon monoxide – appropriately dubbed “the silent killer” – also gets little or no attention in many homes.

Smoke alarms are such a common presence in our homes that it’s easy to just expect them to work every time. But like many other devices and appliances around the house, smoke detectors require regular cleaning and maintenance to function effectively. Many models on the market offering smoke and carbon monoxide detection – an often overlooked consideration.



Change smoke detector batteries annually.

To ensure the best family fire safety, smoke and carbon monoxide detection possible, consider these tips:

Easy Fire Safety Strategies:

- If you have children in the house, always store candles and matches well out of their reach, either in a locked drawer or on a high shelf.
- Always keep space heaters a minimum of 3 feet away from flammable materials like paper, clothing, bedding and draperies.
- Never leave food that's being cooked on the stovetop or under the broiler unattended – if you need to leave the kitchen, turn off the heat source.
- Keep a small multipurpose fire extinguisher (one that's approved by a testing laboratory) in your home for putting out small fires.
- If you have a fireplace, be sure to have it cleaned by a professional once a year to remove flammable soot, and always keep screen in place to catch flying sparks.
- When grilling outdoors, always use the appropriate type of lighter fluid, and never add more after the fire is lit – this can cause flames to flare up and spread to other objects or areas.

Smoke Alarm Maintenance Musts:

- Keep them clean. Use your vacuum cleaner's upholstery attachment to clear way dust and cobwebs. And if the manufacturer's instructions say that it's safe to, gently vacuum inside the detector as well.
- Change the batteries once a year. Choose a date that's easy to remember, like a birthday, anniversary, or the day you switch over to daylight-saving time.
- Test your smoke detectors every month. Just press the test button – if the alarm sounds, it works. Want to be extra sure? Light a candle, blow it out, and then hold it below the detector – the trailing smoke should set the alarm off.

Facts to Know About Carbon Monoxide:

- Carbon Monoxide (CO) is produced when wood and fossil fuels like oil, natural gas, charcoal, kerosene and gasoline don't burn completely.
- CO can't be seen, smelled, or tasted – that's why its nickname is "the silent killer." Only a carbon monoxide detector can warn you that CO is present.
- CO poisoning often feels like the flu, with symptoms like fatigue, muscle aches, nausea and headache, but can progress to disorientation, elevated heart rate, convulsions, organ damage, and even death.
- Carbon monoxide harms people by blocking oxygen from entering the bloodstream. CO bonds to the hemoglobin in blood, preventing it from doing its job: carrying oxygen throughout your body.
- When you're asleep, you can't feel CO symptoms. Make sure that carbon monoxide detectors are installed in all bedrooms and sleeping areas of your home – they save lives.

Creating an Escape Plan:

Does your family know where to go and what to do if your smoke alarm or carbon monoxide detector goes off? If not, now is the time to make a plan.

- Walk through your home with your children and point out all possible exits, like doors, windows and fire escapes.
- Sit down together to draw a map of your home, and mark the shortest escape routes from each room.
- Choose someplace safe and familiar outside your home where family members can meet in an emergency, such as a neighbor's house, a nearby street sign, or a lamp-post.

- Pair young, elderly, or handicapped members of your household with an “escape buddy” who can help them safely leave the house during a fire or any other emergency.
- Hold practice escape drills every few months, both day and night, so that your family is extremely familiar with the procedure should an emergency ever occur.

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