

# Smoke detectors in homes save lives

By Teri Mizuhara

“There is no getting around it, smoke alarms save lives. It is your first line of defense in a structure fire. Fifty-one percent of residential structure fires resulting in a fire death occur between 10pm and 6am and 55 percent of these deaths occur in the bedroom, so it is critical to have working smoke alarms in your sleeping areas of your home,” says CalFire’s Amador-El Dorado Unit Chief Kelly Keenan. “For as little as \$4.45 you can buy a smoke alarm at Home Depot and sleep soundly knowing your family is protected.”



Key points to consider before purchasing smoke alarms:

Photoelectric Smoke Alarms are better at sensing “smoldering fires” because smoldering fires produce large smoke particles. A smoldering fire may burn for hours before bursting into a flaming fire. Often these fires are caused by a cigarette, dropped match or stick of incense burning in a couch or in bedding.

Ionization Smoke Alarms are better at sensing small smoke particles which are usually produced by a flaming fire that is burning items fast and spreading throughout an area very quickly. This may be a grease fire or a garbage can that caught fire. If your current smoke alarm goes off when you cook, consider replacing that alarm with a photoelectric smoke alarm and placing the other ionization alarm away from your

kitchen.

Never disable a smoke alarm. Never remove the battery from your smoke alarm. National statistics indicate that 66 percent of people who died in house fires did not have a smoke alarm or the smoke alarm they had was not working. Consider interconnecting your smoke alarms, although this is more expensive, this would allow one smoke alarm to “talk” to the others by a hardwired system or wireless technology. If one alarm senses smoke it will relay the information and all the alarms in the home will go off making sure everyone is aware of a problem and allow them to safely exit the home.

For households with hearing impaired family members, there are smoke alarms designed to meet the needs of these individuals. The systems utilize extra loud (90dB) signaling combined with a bright strobe light to alert sleeping individuals and/or vibrating pager systems that transmit to hardware placed on bed frames, under pillows or to specialized wrist watches. Check the yellow pages under “fire protection services” to purchase this specialized equipment and make sure to get competitive bids.

If your household includes children, some studies suggest that smoke alarms that allow a parent to record their voice instead of the common “beep” alarm work better at rousing children from stage 4 deep sleep. Although they are more expensive, it is cheap insurance in the event of a house fire.

“In closing, make sure you have a smoke alarm in each bedroom, outside the sleeping area(s) and on each level of the home. Follow the manufacturer’s instructions when installing the smoke alarm, test the battery monthly and change the battery twice a year (when you change your clocks). Don’t forget to vacuum the smoke alarms since dust and bugs can cause false alarms. Replace the smoke alarm a minimum of every 10 years; just because the light is on does not mean it will work properly, nothing lasts forever,” Keenan says.

For more information on fire safety, go online.  
[www.fire.ca.gov](http://www.fire.ca.gov).

*Teri Mizuhara works for CalFire.*