

FIRES: PLAN & PRACTICE YOUR ESCAPE BEST PRACTICES

Everyone should plan how they would escape their homes, workplaces, and public places they visit, such as hotels and restaurants. Research shows that people do not truly panic in a fire situation. They make poor decisions because they never thought about it. The habit of developing situational awareness and an escape plan can have a life-saving impact on you, your family, and your friends.

Work

Fires in workplaces are rare, and large fires are even rarer. Employees and visitors in workplaces are awake and alert, leading to earlier detection and response to a developing fire. That is good news. Since workplace fires are rare, employees may not know the employer's plans for a fire or a fire notification. This speaks to the employer's need to not only have an Emergency Action Plan as required by PEOSH but to make sure employees know the Plan and have practiced the Plan. Key points to cover during training include:

- The fire detection and alarm system – Does the system include both heat and smoke detectors? Is the system activation automatically transmitted to a monitoring agency, such as ADT or local police, or will an occupant need to call 9-1-1 to report the alarm?
- If there is no fire alarm system, how should a fire be reported and occupants notified?
- Primary and secondary escape routes should be pointed out from the various locations in the department
- Where are the primary and secondary assembly points?
- The importance of promptly reporting to the assembly point and getting counted
- Assisting employees with special needs, visitors, and contractors in the evacuation process.

Home

Even more importantly, everyone should discuss with their family what a home escape plan entails and the value of practicing it. These discussions are more important than ever because today's homes burn faster than ever. The synthetic fibers used in modern home furnishings and the trend of newer homes being built with more open spaces and unprotected lightweight construction contribute to the faster rate of fire growth. Older homes may include larger dimensional lumber but have the hazards of older wiring that may be incompatible with today's appliances or multiple renovations that may have created void spaces or holes in fire partitions.

"People tend to underestimate their risk to fire, particularly at home. That over-confidence lends itself to a complacency toward home escape planning and practice," said Lorraine Carli, Vice President of Outreach and Advocacy at the National Fire Protection Association. "But in a fire situation, we've seen time and again that advance planning can make a potentially life-saving difference."

Your home escape plan should include the following:

- Two ways out of every room, usually doors and windows.
- A designated outside meeting place (like a tree, light pole, or mailbox) that's a safe distance from the home.
- They should call 9-1-1 from the meeting place. They should not delay their evacuation while they call from inside the home.

Homes with young children should practice their escape plans twice a year.

All homes must have working smoke alarms on every level of the house and in or near every bedroom. Test your smoke detectors monthly. Remember to change the batteries in your detectors when you change your clocks unless you have a newer model with a sealed long-life battery.

The sensors of a smoke detector have a life expectancy of usually 7 to 10 years. If you can't recall when you last changed the detectors, change them now. Use a marker and date the new detectors as a reminder to change them again.

Homes should also have at least two ABC fire extinguishers with a minimum rating of 2A: 10BC. One fire extinguisher should be located outside the kitchen, not immediately next to the stove. A fire on the stove can make the extinguisher inaccessible if it is too close. Garages are the second-most common area for fires. A second fire extinguisher should be strategically located here.

Check the date on the extinguisher. If it is older than ten years, replace it this weekend.

Away From the Home

Planning should include places you visit, such as restaurants, hotels, concert venues, libraries, and other public places. Having a sense of situational awareness is even more important when you are out of your home and not at work because these locations are less familiar. Teach your family how to be aware of their surroundings.

Several of the most deadly fires in U.S. history have occurred in restaurants. When you and your family are seated, point out to everyone the two nearest exits from your table. Look for choke points along the routes, such as overcrowded tables. And trust your instincts. Leave at the first sign of a fire. Many deaths are the result of smoke inhalation from delaying their evacuation.

There is a great temptation for owners/operators of public venues to allow more patrons than permitted by the fire codes. If the restaurant or other venue looks overcrowded, consider your options.

When traveling, after checking into your hotel room, count doors to the left and right of your room to the nearest two stairwells. Do not use the elevators in the event of a fire.

Be a hero. Plan and practice your escape from a fire for a greater sense of fire awareness in your home and workplace.

A New Jersey-certified fire extinguisher vendor must examine extinguishers in workplaces and public spaces annually. The examination should include weighing the extinguisher and checking for defects that would not be identified during the monthly quick-check. For example, the pressurized extinguisher must be pressure-tested (hydrostatic) to ensure the shell's structural integrity. Or that the powder has not become caked from being under pressure for several years.

Most home fire extinguishers have a 10-year life. Manufacturers either stamp or label the manufacture date on the extinguisher's body. The label should also include the expiration date.