

Plan a Fire Escape Route to Get Out Alive

Be ready to leave at a moment's notice by planning and practising beforehand

There are few things scarier than being woken up in the middle of the night by a smoke alarm and not knowing what to do. The best thing you can do for you and your family is to think ahead, be prepared and know how you get out quickly if you have to.

Timing is everything

Homes can burn rapidly, and you have no way of knowing how long the fire has been burning before you hear the smoke alarm or smell any smoke. Assume that from the time you become aware of the fire, you have less than two minutes to get out of your home safely. Don't go hunting for things. Once you're safely outside, call the fire department and stay outside until they give you the OK to go back in.

Come up with a plan

The best time to come up with a plan to get out of your house is before there is an emergency. Think ahead about scenarios where you may need to get out of particular rooms, and talk with your family about it. How do you get out of the kitchen if there's a fire? What about the upstairs bedrooms? How about the basement? Think of at least two ways out of each space, and ensure you have the means to evacuate if you need to. That could mean having a rope ladder upstairs if you need to leave by a window, or a stool, chair or desk you can climb on to get out of a basement window.

Choose a meeting place

Make sure you pick a family meeting place outside the home and let everyone in your household know where it is. Once everyone leaves, they should immediately gather at the meeting place to make it easier to identify if everyone has safely escaped. Pick a meeting place that adults and kids will easily recognize and will understand how to get to. Your meeting place should also be at least 10 metres from your home and accessible day or night, summer or winter.

Practise your plan

Having a plan is great, but practising it will help you learn if your plan works, or if you'll need to make changes. As you go through the plan with family members or roommates, check to make sure everyone understands the plan. It should be simple enough that you can follow it at 3 a.m. with an alarm ringing and smoke filling a hallway.

A few more pointers:

- Remember to close doors to rooms you've verified are empty as you leave the home, as in a real fire this can help contain the spread.
- Teach your kids how to escape on their own, as you may not be home to help them, or you may not be able to get to them quickly.
- Practise your plan in the daylight, but also after it's dark out. Things look different at night, especially with the lights off.
- Make sure any fire escape tools are ready to use beforehand. You shouldn't be struggling to open a box containing an escape rope ladder when smoke is filling the air.

Fire safety in multi-family buildings

Apartments and condos have their own unique concerns

Multi-family residential buildings can be diverse. Low rise, high rise, townhome, duplex – there's no shortage of variety. Depending on the age and construction of the building, as well as renovations undertaken over the years, a structure's fire safety system may be unlike the systems in other buildings you've lived in. Alarms sound different, and the building's in-suite heating, water and cooking equipment may require you to be aware of risks you've never thought of before.

Ask your property manager, landlord or condominium board as many questions as it takes for you to feel comfortable with their fire safety plan. Even before you sign a lease, consider asking some of the following questions to get a sense of how much your prospective building operators know or care about fire safety.

Get to know your building

As someone living in a building, you should know basic life safety things about the structure before a fire or evacuation event happens. Note where the building's exits are, where the nearest staircase is (not always obvious if you take the elevator up and down every day), where the fire alarm pulls are in relation to your suite, as well as any fire safety details your property manager can provide. Other questions to ask:

- Are there common fire extinguishers for if there's a fire in the hallway?
- Is the in-suite smoke alarm hard-wired into the building's power, or do you need to change batteries?
- Is the tenant or the building responsible for testing, maintaining and changing the in-suite smoke alarms?
- Is there a multi-stage alarm? What should you do if the alarm goes off?
- Does the building have a muster point for residents?
- Is there any heating maintenance required in the suite? If so, who is responsible for it? (Especially a concern if there's an in-suite furnace, which will need air filter changes, etc.)

Read up on the rules

You should also get familiar with the building's condo bylaws or tenant agreement so you understand what is and isn't allowed in the building. Not all buildings allow smoking, and others have specific rules about smoking on balconies. Natural Christmas trees may or may not be allowed, and there are different rules around barbecue units on balconies. (Solid fuel is not allowed, but propane or natural gas grills may be acceptable in your building) You may also be expected to provide proof of insurance in case something or someone in your suite is found to have caused a fire.

Get a carbon monoxide alarm

Not every rental unit has one, so consider getting a carbon monoxide (CO) alarm, especially if there's any combustion happening in or near your suite. If your suite has a gas stove, furnace or water heater, a wood or gas fireplace or is near the building's parkade, picking up a plug-in portable CO alarm is an inexpensive way to warn your family if the highly toxic but colourless, odorless gas is present in your suite. Because it's portable, you can take it with you when you move.