

Help Keep Your Family Safe with Smoke Alarms

As the cool chill of fall turns into the arctic blasts of winter across much of the nation, families often turn to fireplaces, wood stoves and space heaters to help stay warm. Many also adorn their homes with festive candles and decorated trees for the holidays.

While these go a long way towards keeping the home temperature comfortable and creating cozy ambiance, it is important to know what will best protect your family in the event of a house fire, and take a few simple steps to make sure your family stays safe.

The most critical steps you can take are: 1) make sure that your smoke alarm system is in working order, 2) devise an escape plan and practice it, and 3) never go back into a burning building.

Thanks to smoke alarms, Americans are safer than they've ever been. In fact, a study by the United States Fire Administration showed that 88 percent of the fatal fires in single-family homes from 2001-2004 occurred where there were no working smoke alarms.

And the design of smoke alarms continues to get better, with new innovations including wireless technology and alternate signal noises that are easier for children and seniors to hear.

There has been debate in the news about the value of smoke alarm systems compared to the addition of sprinkler systems, as special interest groups have stepped up pressure on local governments to mandate installation of sprinklers in newly-constructed one- and two-family homes.

Your home builder can arrange for the installation of sprinkler systems in your new home. But it's important to note that installing these systems cannot guarantee anyone's safety. And maintaining these systems, especially for home owners in cold climates, can be costly and time-consuming.

Smoke inhalation, not flames, kills the majority of men, women and children lost in house fires. And residential fires are usually either the “fast, flaming” or the “slow, smoldering” kind, where the only protection the occupant can depend upon is an operating smoke alarm.

In a smoldering fire, such as those caused by smoking materials – which are the No. 1 cause of residential fire deaths – there is not enough heat generated to activate the sprinkler system. In fact, the USFA found in 2006 that in 57 percent of reported home fires, the fire was too small to activate the fire sprinklers.

Residential fire sprinklers can significantly increase the cost of a new home, pushing what was once an affordable dream out of the reach of many families. Every family needs to have a fire safety action plan, and have the right to choose for themselves which type of preventative device they want to use.

If you have questions about smoke alarms, or want to know other precautions you can take around the home to help keep your family safe, visit the National Association of Home Builders at www.nahb.org/forconsumers.