

for your  
**home**

# Home is where the fire is

## Are you prepared?

By Penny Musco

IT'S AN UNFORTUNATE fact that stories about tragic fires, from large ones involving several buildings to smaller fires in homes, appear regularly in the news. Statistics bear out this sad and sobering truth: The place where we feel the safest is where we're most likely to die in a fire.

Why is that? The simple answer is that we tend to give fire prevention only a passing thought. We place more value on how our house looks than on safety. But fire officials hope Fire Prevention Week, this year October 4–10, will motivate all of us to rethink that mentality.

### Early warning

While Canada has no national standard for the number of smoke alarms in a home, the usual recommendation is one in every dwelling. Laws vary by province or territory, (see [parachutecanada.org/downloads/policy/](http://parachutecanada.org/downloads/policy/)



*CO%20Detector%20Legislation%20Chart-2014.pdf* to find out your province/territory's law), but many experts advocate adding one outside each sleeping area and, if you keep your bedroom door closed, another inside.

"We know early activation contributes to safely exiting a home in the event of fire," says Costco member Paul Boissonneault, fire chief and community emergency management coordinator for Brant County, Ontario, and



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIDDE

also president of the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs. "If you create your own standards that are safer than what legislation provides, then you're doing your family justice."

Carbon monoxide detectors also are required in many regions, with Ontario the latest to mandate one in each residence. But again, more is better. All devices should be interconnected—hard-wired by an electrician or through using wireless alarms—and have battery backup in case of a power outage. Smoke-carbon monoxide combination detectors with lithium batteries offer added convenience. The Safe at Home website ([safeathome.ca](http://safeathome.ca)) has easy-to-read, practical advice on the purchase, installation and maintenance of each kind.

Boissonneault is a fierce advocate of sprinkler systems as well. "There has never been a fatality in a residential location where sprinklers existed," he declares. He would love to see them consistently offered not only as an optional upgrade in new home construction, just as higher-quality flooring would be, but also when people remodel an existing house.

"Granite countertops are a luxury-based item that improves aesthetics and increases a home's value," he says. "Well, is a sprinkler system something that needs to be high-

## Keeping safe away from home

### WHILE TRAVELLING

- Review the escape plan posted on your hotel/motel door, then count the number of doors between your room and the nearest exit.
- Keep your room key next to your bed and take it if you have to leave—you may need to return if the smoke and fire are too intense.

### IN PUBLIC BUILDINGS

- Study the evacuation plan (often posted near the elevators) at your office.

- Know the location of all exits in stores, restaurants, etc.

### ANYWHERE

- When an alarm sounds, leave immediately, closing doors behind you.
- Use the stairs, never the elevators.
- If there's smoke, crawl below it.
- If you can't escape, shut off heating/cooling systems, stuff wet towels around the door, let the fire department know your location and wait by a window.

(From [nfpa.org/safety-information/for-consumers/occupancies/](http://nfpa.org/safety-information/for-consumers/occupancies/))—PM

lighted more than aesthetics and resale value? I would say yes.” He maintains that many common misconceptions about sprinklers—that they’re expensive and unsightly, and will do a lot of damage if they fail—are not true anymore: “The companies have worked very, very hard on that.”

### **And if there is a fire ...**

Alarms are the first line of defence—but they’re not much good without a strategy in place if they do go off. Fire ladders and extinguishers can be effective tools, although Boissonneault cautions they could give you a false sense of security if you don’t know how to use them properly. What’s needed most is a fire escape plan:

- Identify two ways out of each room.
- Ensure children know how to exit by themselves, if necessary.
- Provide for those who require extra help (e.g., the elderly and disabled).
- Agree on an outdoor meeting place.
- Phone the fire department from outside.
- Don’t go back in.

The Canada Safety Council has suggestions for drawing up a plan ([canadasafetycouncil.org/home-safety/very-home-needs-fire-escape-plan](http://canadasafetycouncil.org/home-safety/very-home-needs-fire-escape-plan)), and Boissonneault also encourages asking your local fire service for help: “First responders are there to assist in time of need, but we’re also there to educate and prevent fires from taking place.”

### **So now you’re all set, right?**

While fires are often visible, there’s a hidden killer that may lurk in homes: carbon monoxide (CO). Costco member John Gignac was a firefighter for 34 years, but for the last seven he’s devoted himself to advocating for CO monitors in every residence. In December 2008, his niece Laurie Hawkins, her husband and their two children perished from CO exposure. They did not have CO alarms. Gignac established the Hawkins-Gignac

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### **The Costco Connection**

Costco and Costco.ca carry a variety of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. Costco.ca also carries escape ladders.

Foundation ([endthesilence.ca](http://endthesilence.ca)) so no other family would have to suffer a similar loss.

One of the foundation’s aims is to inform the public about just how lethal and insidious this colourless, odourless and tasteless gas is. Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning mimic the flu—tiredness, lethargy and nausea—but without a fever. Often, though, carbon monoxide takes its toll while victims sleep. Appliances such as fireplaces, furnaces and hot-water heaters should be checked annually by qualified technicians, but an alarm is the only way you’ll know if CO is present in your home.

Detectors are required in many regions, with Ontario being the latest to mandate one in every residence, near each sleeping area. If you experience any of the physical warning signs or if the alarm goes off, leave immediately and call emergency services.

“Help me honour my family’s memory and make sure your family is protected,” says Gignac. “Laurie would want it that way.” 

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*Penny Musco is a freelance writer who writes on a variety of topics.*