

Are you prepared? Home is where the fire is

By Penny Musco

WHILE CLEANING UNDER my daughter's bed recently, I came across the fire ladder we'd bought for her second-floor room. My mind flashed back to last year's fire in a Brazilian nightclub, which killed over 240 people. And nearly 10 years ago, a similar fire in Rhode Island claimed 100 lives.

I remembered those tragedies because they took over the headlines for days. But I discovered some even more disturbing statistics, ones I've never seen on the front page:

- A home fire is reported every 85 seconds in this country.
- Ninety-two percent of fire-related civilian deaths occur not in a club or store, but in homes.

"The spectacular fires make the news," says Ernest Mitchell, fire administrator for the U.S. Fire Administration and a Costco member. "But fires where we're losing people happen on a daily basis, and we don't hear about it."

Why is the place where we feel safest also where we're most likely to die in a fire? Because while most residences have at least one smoke alarm, three out of five fire fatalities are in homes with no detectors or no functioning ones. And only around one-quarter of American households have developed and practiced a fire evacuation plan.

If these figures shock you, good, say fire prevention experts. They hope they'll spur you into action.

Early warning

During Fire Prevention Week (October 5 to 11) the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) focus is on alarms, says Judy Comoletti, NFPA division manager, public education.

How many you need may surprise you: "One inside every bedroom, outside each sleeping area and then on every level of the home, including the basement," she explains.

Maintaining the detectors is crucial. Many are deactivated due to "nuisance" alarms, often set off by cooking fumes. But those are especially crucial, since the kitchen is where most home fires begin. Instead,

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Keeping safe away from home

ON THE ROAD

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)—PM

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“purchase a photoelectric smoke alarm, one with a hush button or move the alarm farther away,” Comoletti advises.

Check detectors monthly with the test button, buy new ones every 10 years (the manufacture date is on the back) and replace batteries as necessary.

Don't forget carbon monoxide detectors—get one for outside each sleeping area and for every level of your home (better yet, get a smoke-carbon monoxide alarm combo).

Get out and stay out

Alarms are the first line of defense, but they're not much good without an escape plan:

- Identify two ways out of each room.
- Ensure children know how to exit.
- 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.

Other measures also help. One is home sprinkler systems, which buy more time. “They don't cost any more than upgrading to granite countertops,” says Mitchell. Fire ladders are “a last resort,” he notes, because they can be hard to use. Fire extinguishers are best placed in the kitchen and garage, but he cautions, “They aren't much use unless you find out how to use

them and in what circumstances.”

Go to nfpa.org/safety-information and usfa.fema.gov/citizens for tips on escape planning, then practice at least twice annually.

So now you're all set, right?

No, says Costco member Frank Field, retired health and science editor and meteorologist for a trio of New York television stations. Alarms and evacuation plans are essential, but first you must understand fire itself.

“For 50 years, I watched countless reports of fires,” he says, but what really grabbed his attention was an article stating the U.S. lagged behind other countries in fire safety. He realized the scant fire education taught in elementary school left him—and subsequent generations—ill prepared to deal with fire.

“The kids are enamored of the fire engines and the hats and the games, and then it stops,” he laments. “The government spends millions of dollars to teach college freshmen fire safety in dorms. That's a little late. They should hear it from the get-go.”

Field had crusaded for other causes over

The Costco Connection

Costco and Costco.com carry a variety of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, as well as dry chemical fire extinguishers.

the years, notably as an early advocate of the Heimlich maneuver. At age 65, he spent a week training with New York City firefighters, producing a five-part series for WCBS-TV called *Plan to Get Out Alive*, which demonstrated fire's terrifying reality (it's on YouTube).

Then he and two of his children created *Fire Is ...*, a video series aimed at grades 5 and up, vividly illustrating these truths about fire: It's black, hot, smoke and gas, fast and an emergency (view it at nifiresafety.com).

In 2013, the National Association of State Fire Marshals endorsed the program, encouraging members to adopt it in their states. The series and accompanying curriculum are free of charge, in English and Spanish, and are now used extensively in New Jersey and some New England schools as a take-home assignment.

Field concedes *Fire Is ...* is scary, which is why he recommends that children and caregivers watch it together. But he makes no apologies for his passion to teach everyone about the danger of fire, because as he too discovered, “Fires don't occur mostly in schools. They occur at home.” 📺

Penny Musco lives in a first-floor condo (with enough smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, of course).