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Home safe home: Being prepared can prevent a disaster at home



With the right equipment and planning, many of the disasters that happen at home can be prevented. Here's how to make your home an even safer haven.

Know the risks



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Deaths from fires and burns are the third leading cause of fatal injuries at home, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among those at greatest risk for injury or death from fire are very young children and older adults, people living in rural areas and people who live in manufactured homes or poorly built housing.

Besides fire, homes are also the site of a silent, but deadly, disaster: radon and carbon monoxide poisoning. Carbon monoxide is found in fumes from vehicles and can leak from certain home appliances, especially fuel-burning items, such as furnaces, fireplaces and wood-burning stoves. Radon gas, which is the result of the natural decay of uranium in soil and water, can seep into your home or building from the surrounding soil.

Both carbon monoxide and radon pose serious health risks: Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States, and every year, hundreds of Americans die from unintentional carbon monoxide poisoning.

Now that you know the risks, there are a number of precautions you can take that are easy and affordable.

Equipment corner

Just a few pieces of equipment can help you prevent disasters at home — and can mean the difference between life and death.

■ Smoke alarms

Smoke alarms are inexpensive and easy to install. Make sure to install smoke alarms on every floor of the house, including the basement and near rooms where people sleep. Because smoke rises, always install alarms high up on the wall or ceiling. Place smoke

alarms out of the pathway of steam that might come from the bathroom or smoke that can come from cooking to avoid false alarms. This will also decrease the chance that you'll have to deactivate your smoke alarm and then forget to turn it back on.

Make sure to test your fire alarms on a regular basis and switch out the batteries when you change your clocks for daylight saving time. It's also a good idea to replace smoke alarms that are more than 10 years old.

■ Fire extinguishers

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Purchase a fire extinguisher for your home and make sure household members who are old enough know where it's kept and how to use it. A good household fire extinguisher is known as a class ABC extinguisher, which is safe to use on electrical fires and fires related to flammable liquids, such as gasoline.

Store your fire extinguisher in plain view, near your home's exits and out of reach of children. Think about buying at least one extinguisher for every floor of your home. Read the extinguisher's instructions carefully and consider contacting your local fire department for additional training opportunities and tips. Check your fire extinguisher regularly for any damage – make sure there are no dents, clear the nozzles and hoses of dust and debris, and if your extinguisher has a pressure gauge, learn what the correct reading should be.

In addition to having proper equipment, create a household fire escape plan and have household fire drills.

■ Carbon monoxide, radon detectors

Carbon monoxide detectors and radon detection kits are vital to a safe home, as both gases are tasteless and odorless.

To get prepared, install a carbon monoxide detector in your home and don't forget to check and replace the batteries regularly. Install the detector near areas where people sleep. If the alarm goes off, immediately leave your home and call 911 to reach the fire department.

Besides detectors, consider having the home appliances that burn fuel checked yearly to make sure they're working properly.

Radon detection kits are inexpensive, easy to use and can usually be purchased at your local hardware store. All homes are at risk for the buildup of radon, including apartment buildings, though dwellings at or below the third floor are more likely to have high indoor radon levels. If you prefer not to conduct your own testing, you can also hire a professional to do the testing. Fixing a radon problem usually requires the kind of building repairs that only a professional can do.

As well as having the right equipment, always keep numbers to local emergency services handy and accessible, and make sure everyone in your household knows how to make an emergency phone call.



Photo courtesy iStockphoto—Kevin Yisel

Safety in numbers

Staying safe works best when everyone is on board, so make sure to include all of your household members in making your home safer. For example, ask the kids to help you install carbon monoxide detectors, or keep track of how fast your household successfully completes a fire drill and celebrate improvements.



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