
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General

FEEL SAFE AT HOME – BE FIRE SMART AND HAVE A FIRE PLAN

VICTORIA – Last year in British Columbia the Office of the Fire Commissioner received reports of 31 deaths and a further 138 people being injured as a result of residential fires. In most of these tragic cases, a smoke detector was not installed or was not functioning.

Stay Fire Smart, Don't Get Burned is the theme for Fire Prevention Week Oct. 4-10 this year, and the Province is urging residents to make sure their homes have sufficient working smoke alarms and that occupants know what to do if a fire breaks out.

“Fire can spread rapidly in a home and families may have only moments to escape to safety,” said Kash Heed, Minister of Public Safety. “A working smoke alarm can provide that critical early warning that can mean the difference between life and death.”

Since 1979, the B.C. Building Code has required builders to install smoke alarms in all new home construction. This change, along with increased public education on the importance of smoke alarms, has resulted in a steady decline in the number of fire-related fatalities and injuries in B.C. Smoke alarms must be regularly tested to ensure they are working and occupants should know what to do if an alarm goes off.

“In a fire, poisonous gases produced by burning home furnishings like electronics, can be deadlier than flames,” Heed said. “That's why it is crucial for families to have escape plans and to remember to keep low to the ground to avoid deadly smoke.”

“Even when visiting family and friends for extended periods of time, a survey of exit routes in unfamiliar surroundings could be a life-saver,” said Becky Denlinger, B.C. fire commissioner. “Ensuring that visitors, especially those who are elderly or young, know exit routes is an act of hospitality that could save a life.”

As part of Fire Prevention Week, local fire departments throughout British Columbia will hold a Community Fire Drill at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 7. During the drill, residents in participating communities will be encouraged to test their smoke alarm and practice their escape plan.

For more information on the provincewide community fire drill, contact your local fire department.

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A backgrounder follows.

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BACKGROUND

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PREVENTING SOME COMMON CAUSES OF RESIDENTIAL FIRES

Canadian research shows that the leading causes of fires in homes are smoking materials, open flames such as candles, matches etc. and stovetop cooking – all preventable. Here are some of the things each of us can do to better protect ourselves and our families from fires.

Kitchen fires:

- Kitchen fires most often start when the cook is distracted or away from the stove, usually while cooking with fat or oil. When cooking on the stovetop, if you have to leave, remove the pan or pot from the burner and turn it off. Don't leave food unattended with elements on.
- Never attempt to move a flaming pot or pan away from the stove. The movement can fan the flames and spread the fire. The pan will also likely be very hot, causing you to drop it. The immediate action should be to smother the fire by sliding a lid or flat cookie sheet over the pan. Next, turn off the heat and exhaust fan, allowing the pan time to cool. Most importantly, react fast, because grease fires spread very quickly.
- Never put water on a cooking fire.
- If a fire starts in the oven, keep the door closed and turn the oven off.

Disposing of smoking materials:

- Smoking among British Columbians is declining, and outdoor smoking areas are more common – but not necessarily safer. Cigarette butts can ignite plastic or paper containers such as coffee cups, and should not be extinguished in potted plants or landscaping, which often contain a mixture of peat moss, shredded wood and bark that can easily ignite.
- The safest way to extinguish smoking materials is to put them in a metal container with sand, or douse with water before discarding.
- Be vigilant while smoking indoors. Fires in upholstery or bedding can smoulder for a long time, and when they ignite, can block escape routes.

Smoke Alarms:

- Ensure that your home has working smoke alarms, which give occupants the early warning needed, so that everyone can react quickly, follow the escape plan, and get outside to call 911.
- Smoke alarms on every storey of buildings, including basements, and outside all sleeping areas are recommended.
- For best performance, an alarm should be mounted on the ceiling in or near the centre of the room, hall or stairway, and at the head of each stairway leading to an occupied area.
- Test smoke alarms monthly. It is recommended you change batteries twice a year, in spring and fall, when you adjust your clocks.
- Smoke alarms should be replaced after 10 years, as the lifespan of a typical smoke alarm is about 10 years, but some models last as little as five years.