

Fact Sheet on the Danger of Home Fires

The following statistics were gathered by the Red Cross from several sources, including recent Red Cross polling, the U.S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

- Eighty percent of Americans don't realize that home fires are the single most common disaster across the nation. With average heating costs expected to rise 25 percent more this winter, the Red Cross warns families to understand the dangers of home fires and to take steps now to get prepared.
- The American Red Cross responded to more than 73,000 disasters in communities across the United States last year and 92 percent of these were fire related. (American Red Cross)
- American homes suffer an unwanted fire every 10 seconds, and every 60 seconds they suffer a fire serious enough to call the fire department. (U.S. Fire Administration)
- Home heating bills this winter will on average cost consumers 25.7 percent more than last year. Natural gas and heating oil customers are expected to be hit the hardest. (Department of Energy)
- Every two and a half hours someone is killed in a home fire. In a typical year, 20,000 people are injured in house fires. (U.S. Fire Administration)
- Although children five and under make up about 7 percent of the country's population, they accounted for 14 percent of the home fire deaths, assigning them a risk twice the national average. (National Fire Protection Association)
- Half of all households with children under the age of 18 are using an alternate heating source (fireplace, space heater or stove). (American Red Cross)
- Smoking was the leading cause of home fire deaths overall, but in the months of December, January and February smoking and heating equipment caused similar shares of fire deaths. (National Fire Protection Association)
- Heating fires are the second leading cause of residential fires (cooking is the first). Heating fires are fires that are caused by functioning or malfunctioning central heating units, fixed or portable local heating units, fire places, chimneys and water heaters. (U.S. Fire Administration)
- Fixed and portable space heaters, including wood stoves, were involved in 74 percent of fire-related deaths. (U.S. Fire Administration)
- Space heaters (defined as space heating equipment including portable electric heaters, portable kerosene heaters, wood stoves, fireplaces with inserts and room gas heaters) account for 66 percent of all home heating fires. (National Fire Protection Association)
- Only 42 percent of American households have a family emergency plan. (American Red Cross)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Are home fires a big problem in the United States?

Sadly, yes. Last year, the Red Cross responded to more than 73,000 disasters, 92 percent of them were fire-related. This is a devastating fact because nearly all home fires are preventable.

Is there a lack of understanding about home fires?

Eighty percent of Americans are completely unaware that home fires are the most common disaster in the United States, while 68 percent of those surveyed cited floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and mudslides as greater threats to their family than home fires.

Why does the American Red Cross think that people are so unaware of the dangers of home fires?

The Red Cross often calls home fires “silent disasters,” the ones that people typically don’t hear about. Large-scale disasters such as the recent hurricanes make the headlines and appear in countless television news stories.

Are alternative sources of energy understood to be a cause of fires?

According to a poll released by the American Red Cross, four in ten households are using high-risk methods to help heat their homes this winter, probably related to the expected 25 percent rise in heating costs. Alternative heating sources are involved in 74 percent of fire-related deaths, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Are families using alternative sources of energy at a greater risk?

Yes. The Red Cross poll found that 42 percent of families are using alternatives such as space heaters, fireplaces or wood/coal stoves to stay warm and that 49 percent among families with children under 18 are using these same alternatives. Alternative heating sources are involved in 74 percent of fire-related deaths, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Are alternative sources of heating a good option?

There are ways to use alternative sources of heating more safely. The American Red Cross recommends that you keep all sources of fuel (paper, clothing, bedding and carpets or rugs) at least three feet away from heat sources, such as when using alternative heating like a space heater and when cooking. Also make sure to follow the manufacturer’s instructions on how, when and where to use heaters for safety.

Why is having a plan important?

Although many residential fires are preventable, fires can ignite very quickly and without warning. If you and your loved ones do not have a plan, you may have little or no time at all to decide the best method to escape. Visit www.redcross.org for more information on how to make a plan, or contact your local Red Cross chapter.

Should we have smoke alarms on each level of our home?

Absolutely, smoke alarms should be installed outside each sleeping area and on each additional level of your home. If you and your family sleep with the doors closed, you should install smoke alarms inside sleeping areas, too. Use the test button to check each smoke alarm once a month. When necessary, replace batteries immediately. Replace all batteries at least once a year. Smoke alarms become less sensitive over time. Replace your smoke alarms every 10 years.

How many fire extinguishers should we have in our home?

You should have one or more working fire extinguishers in your home. The Red Cross recommends that you contact your local fire department for proper training.

How do you start by developing an escape plan?

Begin by determining at least two ways to escape from every room of your home. For second or third floors, escape ladders should be used and stored near the window. One of the most important steps of any plan is to select a location outside your home where everyone would meet after escaping. The Red Cross recommends that you practice your escape plan at least twice a year.

Can I go back into my home if I’ve forgotten something important?

Once you are out, stay out! Call the fire department from a neighbor’s home.

What if my escape route is covered in smoke?

If you see smoke or fire in your first escape route, use your second way out. If you must exit through smoke, crawl low under the smoke to your exit. If you are escaping through a closed door, feel the door before opening it. If it is warm, use your second way out.

If smoke, heat or flames block your exit routes, stay in the room with the door closed. Signal for help using a brightly-colored cloth at the window. If there is a telephone in the room, call the fire department and tell them where you are.