

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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Protect Your Loved Ones With Smoke Detectors

Just recently, several stories appeared in the news media about a type of tragedy that occurs all too often throughout the year, but is even more poignant during the holiday season: fires in people's homes. In one incident, a fire in a three family dwelling left the occupants, including at least 7 children, homeless just before Christmas. Fortunately, everyone survived.

The U.S. Fire Administration reports that the number of daily fires increases during holiday periods, injuring 2,600 Americans and causing \$930 million in damages. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, the single most important means of preventing death and injury from fires in dwellings is an early warning signal, allowing the occupants to escape the fire. Smoke alarms provide this warning. a functioning smoke alarm system reduces the risk of dying by 50%.

At this time of year, kitchens are busy with holiday cooking, a fire in the fireplace provides a cozy atmosphere, and decorations like candles, wreaths, and Christmas trees brighten our surroundings, but all contribute to a higher risk of residential fires. Since the winter holiday season is a long one, it makes sense that National Smoke Alarm Day occurs in December. This year, it is December 28th.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reports that the "vast majority" of fatalities from fire are the result of residential fires; in 2/3 of those fires, smoke alarms were either missing or not functioning. According to the FEMA report, 2,500 children and 2,300 senior citizens were injured or killed in home fires in 2002. In all, 3,700 people died and over 20,000 others were injured by fires that year in the United States, revealing one of the highest per capita death rates from fire in the industrialized world. Residential fires kill not only the occupants of the buildings, but cause the deaths of many firefighters as well. On average, 100 firefighters die in the line of duty each year—in 2004, 117 died in fires in 41 states.

As of 1995, an estimated 93% of all American homes contained smoke alarms. However, unless a sufficient number of alarms are positioned properly and are functioning, protection from fire is not adequate. The important points to remember about smoke alarms are

- Smoke alarms should be installed on every level of the dwelling, including the basement. Special attention should be given to sleeping rooms, kitchens, and the area round furnaces and heating sources.
- Install smoke alarms on ceilings or 6 to 8 inches below the ceiling on walls.
- Replace batteries at least once each year. (Choose a birthday, holiday, or special occasion to help you remember. If your alarm is hard-wired to your electrical system, choose a model with battery back-up.)
- Keep the smoke alarms clean. Dust or vacuum over and around the alarm

regularly.

- Replace the alarms every 10 years.
- Test your alarms regularly.

There are different types of smoke alarms, ranging in price from inexpensive to more costly depending upon the features offered. They can be purchased at hardware stores, department stores, supermarkets, drug stores, and even some convenience stores and on the internet. Make sure the alarm is loud enough to wake you from a deep sleep. If everyone had the benefit of a functioning smoke alarm system, the risk of dying would be reduced by 50%. But installing smoke detectors is just the first step in surviving a fire; once the early warning signal goes off, occupants of the dwelling should have escape plans and meeting places established in case the alarm warns of a real fire.

For more information about smoke alarms and residential fires, contact the U.S. Fire Administration at 301-447-1000 (www.usfa.fema.gov) or your local Fire Marshal. Specific information about the types of smoke alarms that are available can be obtained from the Fire Safety Store at 724-966-8606 (www.detectorsandalarms.com), Keep Safe Systems at 604-874-8772 (www.theworkshop.net), and the Meeks Bay Fire Department at www.meeksbayfire.com. Additional information about this or other public health issues is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).