



## Fire Safety Abroad

Hotels; Traveler Toolkit; Travel Health and Safety

9/21/2017

*In an effort to help keep travelers safe abroad, OSAC is reissuing this document detailing steps you, your employees, and your family can take as protection from the dangers of fire. The document examines steps you can take while staying in a hotel as well as in your own home.*

### **Hotel Fires**

Many hotels abroad are not as fire-resistant as those in the United States. Interior materials are often extremely flammable. Escape routes may not be posted in hallways, and exits may be few or sealed. Firefighting equipment and water supplies may be limited. There may be no fast method for alerting a fire department. Sprinkler systems and smoke detectors may be nonexistent.

You must aggressively take responsibility for the safety of yourself and your family. Think about a contingency plan and discuss it with your dependents. Begin planning your escape from a fire as soon as you check into a hotel. Should a fire occur, you could then act without panic and without wasting time.

Staying in the most modern hotel should mean you are protected by the most modern fire-safety protections. Request a lower floor, ideally the second or third. Selecting a room no higher than the second floor enables you to jump to safety. Although most fire departments can reach above the second floor, they may not get to you in time or position a fire truck on your side of the building.

Locate exits and stairways as soon as you check in; be sure the doors open. Count the number of doors between your room and exit or stairway. In a smoke-filled hallway, you could have to feel your way to an exit. Form a mental map of your escape route.

If the hotel has a fire alarm system, find the nearest alarm. Be sure you know how to use it. You may have to activate it in the dark or in dense smoke.

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Ensure that your room windows open and that you know how the latches work. Look out the window and mentally rehearse your escape through it. Make note of any ledges or decks that will aid escape.

Check the smoke detector by pushing the test button. If it does not work, have it fixed or move to another room. You could also carry your own portable smoke detector (with the battery removed while traveling); place it in your room by the hall door near the ceiling.

Keep the room key and a flashlight on the bedside table so that you may locate the key quickly if you have to leave your room.

### **If a Fire Starts**

If you awake to find smoke in your room, grab your key and crawl to the door on your hands and knees. Do not stand; smoke and deadly gases rise while the fresher air will be near the floor.

Before you open the door, feel it with the palm of your hand. If the door or knob is hot, the fire may be right outside. Open the door slowly. Be ready to slam it shut if the fire is close by.

If your exit path is clear, crawl into the hallway. Be sure to close the door behind you to keep smoke out in case you have to return to your room. Take your key, as most hotel doors lock automatically. Stay close to the wall to avoid being trampled.

Do not use elevators during a fire; they may malfunction, or if they have heat-activated call buttons, they may take you directly to the floor where the fire is located.

As you make your way to the fire exit, stay on the same side as the exit door. Count the doors to the exit.

When you reach the exit, walk down the stairs to the exit floor. Hold onto the handrail for guidance and protection from being knocked down by other occupants.

If you encounter heavy smoke in the stairwell, do not try to run through it; you may not make it. Instead, turn around and walk up to the roof fire exit. Prop the door open to ventilate the stairwell and to keep from being locked out. Find the windward side of the roof, sit down, and wait for firefighters to find you.

If all exits are blocked, or if there is heavy smoke in the hallway, you will be better off staying in your room. If there is smoke in your room, open a window and turn on the bathroom vent. Do not break a window unless it cannot be opened. You might want to close the window later to keep smoke out, and broken glass could injure you or people below.

If your phone works, call the desk to tell someone where you are, or call the fire department to report your location in the building. Hang a bed sheet out the window as a signal.

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Fill the bathtub with water. Bail water onto your door or any hot walls with an ice bucket or waste basket. Stuff wet towels into cracks under and around doors where smoke can enter. Tie a wet towel over your mouth and nose to help filter out smoke. If there is fire outside your window, take down the drapes and move everything combustible away from the window. If you are above the second floor, you probably will be better off fighting the fire in your room than jumping. A jump from above the third floor may result in severe injury or death. Remember that panic and a fire's by-products, such as super-heated gases and smoke, usually present a greater danger than the fire itself. If you know your plan of escape in advance, you will be less likely to panic and more likely to survive.

### **Residential Fire Safety**

Although fire does not sound as dramatic as terrorism, in fact it kills far more people each year than terrorist activity overseas. In many countries fire regulations do not exist, firefighting equipment is antiquated, water sources are inadequate, and buildings are constructed with minimum standards.

Each year, thousands of people die in home fires, half of them killed in their sleep by the toxic gases and smoke. Many who do survive spend months in hospitals and suffer lifelong physical and emotional scars. Children are often killed because they panic and try to hide from fire under beds and in closets.

Most of this devastation can be prevented. In only a few years, the use of smoke detectors in the United States has cut in half the number of annual fire fatalities. Fire prevention education is gradually making the odds even better.

Take these basic steps to protect your family from fire, whether you are in the United States or overseas:

- Use smoke detectors in your home.
- Prepare a fire escape plan with your family.
- Conduct a fire drill at least once every six months.

### **Smoke Detectors**

If fire occurs in your home, you may never awaken; smoke and toxic gases kill quietly and quickly. Yet the same smoke that can kill you can save you if it activates a smoke detector. A smoke detector sounds a warning before you can even smell the smoke or see any flames.

The National Fire Protection Association recommends you install smoke alarms inside each bedroom, outside each sleeping area and on every level of the home, including the basement.

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On levels without bedrooms, install alarms in the living room (or den or family room) and/or near the stairway to the upper level.

Smoke detectors must be tested once a month and whenever you return from vacation. Never paint them. Once a year they should be vacuumed to remove any dust or cobwebs inside that would interfere with their functioning.

Be sure everyone in the family recognizes the sound of the alert; test it with all members in the bedrooms with doors closed to be sure that they can hear it.

### **Fire Escape Plan**

Since fire and smoke travel quickly, you may have, at most, only minutes to escape. It is imperative that each member of the family automatically knows what to do.

A fire escape plan is your best bet. With your family, draw a floor plan of your house marking all possible exits. Since fire could block any exit, always have an alternative way to escape.

Know in advance where to go. Double-check exits to be sure they open and that children can handle doors or windows by themselves.

Show all windows, doors, and outdoor features. Note escape aids such as a tree or balcony; check to ensure that they would work.

Locate the nearest fire alarm box or the neighbor's house. Teach your children how to report a fire.

Designate a meeting place outside the house. You must know immediately who may be trapped inside.

Post a copy of the floor plan by the telephone. Advise household employees/babysitters on emergency procedures and contacts

### **Fire Drills**

Practice your plan! Regular fire drills assure that everyone knows what to do. Change the imaginary situation from drill to drill. Decide where the "fire" is and what exits are blocked. When small children learn what to do by rote, they will be less likely to panic in real life situations.

Tell firefighters if there are any pets trapped in the house. Don't try to get them yourself. The dangers of a fire are overwhelming, and the primary consideration is saving human lives. Often pets will escape before you do.

### **Fire Extinguishers**

Every home should have at least one fire extinguisher. Be sure that the extinguisher works and that you know how to operate it.

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Portable fire extinguishers can be effective on a small, confined fire, such as a cooking fire. But if a fire is large and spreading, using an extinguisher may be unsafe; you risk the dangers of inhaling toxic smoke and having your escape route cut off.

Use a fire extinguisher only after you:

- are sure everyone else is out of the building;
- have called the fire department; and
- are certain you can approach the fire safely.

### **Use of Window Escapes**

Before using a window escape, be sure that the door to the room is closed; otherwise, a draft from the open window could draw smoke and fire into the room.

Use an escape ladder or balcony if possible. If there is none, do not jump; wait for rescue as long as you can. Open a window a few inches at the top and bottom while you wait; gases will go out through the top and fresher air will enter through the bottom.

Children must know that it is all right to break a window in the case of emergency. Discuss how to do it, using a baseball bat or a chair. Stand aside to avoid flying glass shards. Place a rug or blanket over the sill before crawling out.

Lower small children from the window. Do not leave first and expect them to follow; if they panic and refuse to jump, you will be unable to get them.

### **A Summary of Fire Safety Reminders**

After a smoke detector warns you of a fire, you have only a few moments to escape.

Even concrete buildings are not fireproof. Virtually all the contents of your home or office will burn very quickly and produce toxic gases that can overpower you.

Sleep with bedroom doors closed. A closed door can hamper the spread of a fire, and the chances of a fire starting in a bedroom are remote.

To escape, keep low and crawl on hands and knees. A safety zone of cleaner air exists nearer the floor.

Once out, no one should be permitted to re-enter a burning house for any reason. Hold on to children who may impulsively run back inside.

Children panic in fire and tend to attempt hiding as a means of escape. Train them to react correctly. As you escape, try to close every door behind you. It may slow the fire's progress.

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Feel every door before you open it. If it is hot, do not open it. If it is cool, brace yourself against the door and open it slowly, checking for fire. A fire that has died down due to lack of oxygen could flare up once the door is open. If that happens, close the door immediately. Never waste time getting dressed or grabbing valuables. If clothes catch fire, drop to the ground and roll to extinguish flames, or smother the fire with a blanket or rug. Never run. Teach children to stop, drop, and roll.

### **The Final Word**

Fires are preventable. The major causes of home fires are:

Carelessness with cigarettes: Never smoke in bed; poisonous gases from a smoldering mattress can kill long before there are flames. After a party, look under cushions for smoldering cigarettes.

Faulty electrical wiring: Many homes in less-developed countries are wired insufficiently to handle the simultaneous use of many electrical appliances. Do not overload circuits. Limit appliances plugged into the same extension cord. Major appliances should have their own heavy-duty circuit. Know where the fuse box is, and instruct older children and household employees on how to shut off power in case of an electrical fire.

Faulty lighting equipment: Check electrical cords for cracks, broken plugs, poor connections. Use correct size bulbs in lamps, and be sure shades are not too close to bulbs.

Carelessness with cooking and heating appliances: Do not leave food cooking unattended.

Have heating system and fireplaces inspected professionally once a year.

Children playing with matches: Teach children fire safety; keep matches and combustibles out of their reach.

Incorrect voltage: Household current and plugs/sockets in many countries are different than in the United States. Transformers may be required to adapt U.S. appliances to the local current. Be sure your appliance, transformer, and the local current are compatible before using.

### **Further Information**

More information on fire safety can be found via the following resources:

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Ready.gov website

U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Home Fire Fact Sheet for Kids

National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) website

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For emergency contacts and other resources abroad, please read OSAC's Crime & Safety Report for the specific country or city of concern.

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