



Smoke Alarms

Smoke alarms save lives, but only if they are the right type, in the right location and working properly.

The Facts

- 1. You are 27% more likely to be seriously injured and four times more likely to die in a house fire without working smoke alarms.*
- 2. Most fatal house fires occur at night.*
- 3. In a house fire, flames cause structural damage whereas smoke is the biggest threat to people.*
- 4. You have approximately three minutes to evacuate your home in the case of fire. The early warning of a smoke alarm could be the difference between life and death.*

The type of alarm is important

Experts agree that smoke alarms save lives, however, the type of alarm can have an impact on their effectiveness. There are two types of alarms generally used in homes in Australia. These are photoelectric and ionisation alarms. Ionisation alarms are best at detecting fast burning fires while photoelectric alarms detect the slower moving smouldering fires. The majority of house fires start as the slow smouldering type.

The major cause of death in house fires is smoke inhalation and of those people that do die from burns they are often incapacitated by smoke before the flames reach them. When we sleep we lose our sense of smell meaning that a fire could smoulder for a long time without us being aware of it.

These days many of the common materials we have in our homes release toxins when they burn. These toxins together with the lack of oxygen caused by the fire creates a lethal combination that can create serious risk.

Many false alarms, particularly in and around the kitchen, may be the result of the incorrect selection of alarm type for the location. Constant false alarms can lead many people to remove the battery from the alarm rendering the unit useless.

Smoke alarms must be tested regularly.

An alarm to suit your needs

The only good alarm is a working one. Ideally smoke alarms should be tested once a month and cleaned and have the batteries changed once a year.

If you have trouble reaching your alarm or climbing a ladder there are alarms available that can be tested with a torch or a household remote control.

There are also alarms on the market that contain emergency evacuation lights that can help with navigating your way in a blackout.

Some people are very heavy sleepers and some medications can also affect your ability to be woken.

Since 2014 the Building Code of Australia requires smoke alarms installed in new and renovated homes to be interconnected. Even if you live in a home that had smoke alarms installed before this requirement you should consider interconnecting your alarms. By interconnecting the smoke alarms in your home everyone in the home can be alerted at the same time.

Interconnecting the alarms may be crucial in saving your family, giving you precious minutes to wake anyone who has not heard the alarm.

Alarms for the hearing impaired

For people with a hearing impairment a standard sounding smoke alarm located in the required position outside the bedroom may be useless.

For this circumstance there are alarms available that have an additional strobe light function and there are also pillow or bed shaker alarms available.

In some states subsidies are available to assist with the installation of these systems. Contact your state deaf society for details on what assistance may be available.

Complying with the standard

Smoke alarms in Australia must comply with the Australian Standards and carry certification to this effect.

If you are unsure which brand of alarm to buy visit the CSIRO's ActiveFire website for a list of certified alarms.

In some states the fire department will come to your home and complete a fire safety inspection and advise you of any areas that need addressing including types, locations and number of smoke alarms available.

Insurance policies

The Building Code of Australia requires that every house in Australia must have working smoke alarms. There are also requirements relating to location and numbers of alarms.

The requirements may differ between states so check with local authorities in your state.

It may not be specifically stated in your insurance policy that you are required to have working smoke alarms installed in your home, however most policies do state that you must comply with all laws and relevant by-laws. Check your own policy and the relevant state laws and ensure you comply.

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