Smoke Detectors Save Lives

House fires seem to happen more frequently this time of year. Frequently the cause is due to a supplemental stove that has been placed too close to furniture or curtains. Other leading causes are overburdened electrical outlets, the use of inappropriate extension cords and of course kitchen fires.

Nationally, more than half of all structural fires occur in some kind of family dwelling. The result is thousands of lives lost and up to $3 billion worth of personal property destroyed. Smoke detectors could go a long way toward saving those lives and reducing the amount of property lost.

Smoke detectors and their batteries are the most inexpensive protection available. Most detectors use a 9-volt battery that can cost less than $2. Often a new detector, including the battery, can be bought for about $15.00.

Smoke detectors save lives, but not when their batteries are missing or run-down. According to national statistics, almost every year lives are lost in a house fire because the battery was removed from the smoke detector to be used for a toy or someone was irritated at the chirping sound that indicates the need for a new battery.

Frequently people take the battery out of their smoke detectors or turn them off because of nuisance alarms. Nuisance alarms are often caused, when cooking, by placing the detector in a bad location, an improperly adjusted fireplace or space heater, smoking or excessive humidity. Carefully follow the installation instructions for the detector to minimize nuisance alarms.

Every smoke detector has a test button that checks the electrical circuits and smoke sensor when it is pressed. Pressing the test button also causes the detector to sound its alarm to tell you that everything is working. It is a good idea to test the smoke detectors at least once a month, especially during the heating season. Frequent checking will not significantly weaken the battery.

Some smoke detectors are powered by the home's electricity and don't have batteries. These hard-wired detectors should also be tested frequently. If a hard-wired smoke detector is found to be unreliable, replace it immediately. It is also a good practice to have a battery-powered detector as a backup for the hard-wired detector.

There should be a smoke detector on each floor of the house. The closer the detector is to potential fire sources such as the kitchen, hot water heater, furnace, fireplace or wood stove, the more time you may have to escape. The bedroom area of the house is the most important area to
protect. Escape paths such as stairwells and hallways are other important locations for smoke detectors.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), “smoke alarms that are properly installed and maintained play a vital role in reducing fire deaths and injuries. If there is a fire in your home, smoke spreads fast and you need smoke alarms to give you time to get out. Having a working smoke alarm cuts the chances of dying in a reported fire in half. Almost two-thirds of home fire deaths resulted from fires in homes with no smoke alarms or no working smoke alarms.”

NFPA highly recommends:

- Install smoke alarms in every bedroom, outside each sleeping area and on every level of your home.
- Test your smoke alarms every month.
- When a smoke alarm sounds, get outside and stay outside.
- Replace all smoke alarms in your home every 10 years

(Sources: Dr. George Maher, Agricultural Safety Specialist, NDSU and the National Fire Protection Agency)

For additional information on these and other topics, contact the UT Extension Office, 925 East Baddour Parkway, Lebanon, TN 37087, 615-444-9584 or acorrell@utk.edu. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in all programs. Visit the UT/TSU Extension webpage at http://utextension.tennessee.edu/wilson or look for UT & TSU Extension, Wilson County on Facebook.

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