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Home & Garden

House fires burn much faster than they used to. Here's how to survive.

By **Elisabeth Leamy** November 21

If your house is on fire, how many minutes do you think you have to get out alive?

If you're like 80 percent of Americans surveyed, you'll say five or 10 minutes. Wrong! According to Underwriters Laboratories, which conducts state-of-the-art fire safety testing, you have three minutes or less. "Most people underestimate the speed and power of fire and smoke," according to the National Fire Protection Association. You shouldn't fumble with the fire extinguisher, grab your photo albums or even rescue your cat. **GET OUT!**

That's what Audra Fordin did when a faulty electrical wire started a devastating fire in her Roslyn Heights, N.Y., home. "When my husband yelled 'fire,' my body went into 'go' mode," said Fordin. "I scooped up my three children and flew outside, hurdling 18 steps and two landings." Fordin says she would not have known to act so fast had it not been for a kindergarten project of her daughter's that required the family to do a home fire drill.

UL says that 30 years ago, you had up to 17 minutes to escape a house fire, but today's homes burn faster. Why? Open floor plans provide oxygen and don't provide barriers. And synthetic building materials and furnishings burn at a much faster rate than the natural products used decades ago. UL videotaped a dramatic side-by-side experiment that showed how rapidly a modern living room went up in flames compared with a vintage one.

“You want to have an escape plan and practice it regularly because there is a limited time window to act,” said Stephen Kerber, director of UL’s Firefighter Safety Research Institute. “We can’t emphasize enough: If you can get out, get out.”

The stakes are high. Residential fires kill more people than any other kind, according to the Federal Emergency Management Administration. In fact, roughly seven Americans die every day in house fires.

Some of those people die because they try to fight the fire themselves. Fire extinguishers are wonderful tools, but most of us don’t know when or how to use them. I once did an experiment at a fire training center, thrusting fire extinguishers into the hands of unsuspecting volunteers and yelling for them to put out a fire. Every single one made critical mistakes. FEMA says you should only use a fire extinguisher if:

- You are trained in how to use the extinguisher.
- You can put out the fire in five seconds or less.
- The fire is small and contained — like in a wastebasket.
- There is no flammable debris or hazardous material nearby.
- You have the right type of extinguisher for the type of fire.
- There are two ways to exit the area quickly if you fail.

Montgomery County, Md., fire investigator Donny Boyd has seen the aftermath when people fail. “Fire doubles in size every minute,” said Boyd. “You may think you can manage it, but I’ve seen people who have perished in the heat and gases, trying to fight the fire themselves.” Boyd says people who spend time struggling with a fire extinguisher often delay calling 911, which compounds the problem.

Your priority should be surviving the fire, not putting out the fire. Here are several steps you can take — before and during a fire — to increase your chances.

Before a fire

- **Interconnected smoke detectors.** You should have smoke alarms in every sleeping room, outside each sleeping area and on every level of your home. And those alarms should be wirelessly connected to one another, so that if there’s a fire in your basement, for example, the alarm in your bedroom will go off.

- **Two exits per room.** Map out two ways to get out of every room in your house, even if one of them is a window, and keep those exits clear.
- **Family fire drills.** Practice your evacuation plan so that everyone in the family not only knows how to get out, but also reverts to the plan instead of panicking during a fire.
- **Clear address numbers.** Drive past your house at night and see if the address is clearly visible from the street for emergency crews to find you. If not, install better numbers or lighting.
- **Close doors while you sleep.** Fires that break out while you are sleeping can be particularly devastating. Closing your door keeps smoke out and temperatures down, giving you precious extra minutes to evacuate.
- **Designate a meeting place.** Everyone in the family should know of a spot nearby — but out of fire range — where you will meet if you evacuate separately in a fire.

During a fire

- **Block smoke:** If you are stuck in a room, close the doors and windows, and put wet fabric over openings where smoke can get in.
- **Get low:** Bend way down or crawl as you evacuate because smoke rises and kills more people than fire itself.
- **Check doors:** Look for smoke and feel for heat at closed doors, a sign that there's fire on the other side. If so, exit through another door or window.
- **Close doors/windows behind you.** Close doors and windows as you escape to minimize the amount of oxygen that can fuel the fire.
- **Exit windows wisely.** Crawl out backward facing the house. Then lower yourself until you are hanging from the window sill. This puts your feet as close to the ground as possible before you drop.
- **Don't go back in.** No matter what — or who — don't go back in. Instead, alert firefighters so they can rescue people trapped inside.

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