



# Your House Is on Fire!

The escape plan you must have, and the new tools to buy *now* **By Jane Bianchi**

**When Michelle Singleton's** husband, Randy, first noticed a glow coming from beneath his closet door, he thought someone had left on a light. It was 1 A.M., and he'd just been woken by the family poodle, Teddy, who wouldn't stop barking. Stepping toward the closet to take a closer look, Randy heard crackling and popping noises. Then he realized that it was more than a glow—his house was on fire.

The Singletons quickly rounded up their kids (Andy, Beth Anne, and Abbey) and the dog, leaving behind treasured family heirlooms and valuable sports memorabilia. "I had always wondered why people don't grab stuff on their way out," says Michelle, a 40-year-old nurse. "But there's no time." Minutes later, after escaping to the front lawn in their pajamas, the Singletons of Powell, TN, stood in shock as their home disintegrated before their eyes.

## HOW FIRES START

Home fires happen more often than you might think. In 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available, there was one home fire every 83 seconds in the United States, injuring about 13,000 people and killing more than 3,000. In fact, home fires are the most common disaster in the country, reports the American Red Cross. Electrical fires, like the one that surprised the Singletons, can be difficult to detect because they can happen inside the walls of your house. But many other fires can be avoided by following some simple rules.

**Stand by your pan** Most home fires are caused by leaving a stovetop burner unattended. "Mixing oil and a high temperature with a turned back is asking for trouble," says Meri-K Appy, president of the Home Safety Council. Be sure to always keep an eye on the range. →

**80%**  
of us don't realize that home fires are the most common disaster in the U.S.

**No eternal flames** Candles don't belong in the bedroom. "If you light one and fall asleep, anything can happen," says Lorraine Carli, a spokesperson for the National Fire Protection Association. Elsewhere, use candles with sturdy, nonflammable holders (no paper plates), and only when you're nearby. Trim the wick to a quarter inch before lighting to control the size of the flame, advises Carolyn Forté, the home appliances & cleaning products director at the Good Housekeeping Research Institute.

**Burn-proof the backyard** When using the outdoor grill, position it away from any siding, deck railings, and overhanging roofs and tree branches. "And make sure it's on level ground," adds Sharon Franke, the kitchen appliances & technology director at the GHRI. Finally, periodically remove grease from the trays below the grill, so nothing is at risk of igniting.

#### ALARMING INFORMATION

You probably already know that you need a smoke alarm on every level of your house (especially in bedrooms and outside all sleeping areas), and that you should buy alarms that have

been tested by an independent lab. Here's what you may not know: In a study published in 2006 by the American Academy of Pediatrics, kids (ages 6 to 12) were 66 percent more likely to be woken up by a personalized alarm that features a pre-recorded message from a parent than by a traditional tone alarm. The SignalOne Safety Vocal Smoke Alarm (\$39, [signalonesafety.com](http://signalonesafety.com) or 404-975-4764) is the only alarm of this kind, and has met the standards of Underwriters Laboratories, which tests product compliance. We also tested it at the GHRI, and the alarm not only performed well, but was easy to use.

It's also important that all your alarms interconnect, so that when one goes off, they all go off. Interconnected alarms have been required in most new residential constructions for at least a decade or two. But if you live in an older home, your alarms may not have this feature. (To find out: Push the "test" button on one, and see if all the alarms sound.)



You can record a personalized parental message on this alarm

If your alarms don't interconnect, you'll have to buy new ones. You can hire an electrician to hardwire them all, which is a large, expensive job. Or you can buy alarms that automatically talk to one another through wireless radio signals (Kidde and First Alert are the two

brands on the market). If they are battery-operated, you can even install them yourself.

Regardless, always remember to do the following:

**Every month** Test the smoke alarm. "You need to make sure that it works, and that your kids know what it sounds like," says Kathy Notarianni, Ph.D., head of the Department of Fire Protection Engineering at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and a mother of three.

**Every year** Change the batteries in the alarms. "In my house, we do it every fall, when we turn the clocks back," says Notarianni. "It's the only way we remember."

**Every 10 years** Replace all alarms—they don't last forever.

### If You're Building a New House...

Look into installing a residential fire sprinkler system—they're not just for commercial buildings anymore. A growing number of local jurisdictions are even mandating them in new-home construction. And with

good reason: Installing both smoke alarms and a fire sprinkler system reduces the risk of death from a home fire by 82 percent.

**Won't all that water damage my home?** Only the sprinkler closest to the fire will activate—when the temperature next to the sprinkler hits about 160 degrees. Fifteen to 20 gallons of

water will be released per minute. (A firefighter's hose would discharge up to 250 gallons.)

**Why not just wait for the fire department?** It generally takes firefighters four to five minutes to arrive on the scene, but sprinklers typically turn on within one minute of the fire starting.

**Won't they look ugly?** Modern home designs can

be mounted flush with walls or ceilings.

**Are they expensive?** Installation costs roughly \$1 to \$2 per square foot of your home. But if you choose to install them, insurance companies may provide up to a 15 percent discount on policies.

**How do I install one?** To find a qualified contractor in your state, go to [homefiresprinkler.org](http://homefiresprinkler.org).

**PROTECTION WHILE YOU SLEEP**

As of this month, new mattresses on the market will be open-flame-fire-resistant to comply with a new standard from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. But you don't have to spend tons of cash on a brand-new bed. Louisville Bedding Company created a mattress pad and a box spring cover that provide a similar level of protection for up to 30 minutes. The FireDefender Sleep System ranges from \$120 (twin) to \$200 (California king); for a list of retailers: firedefendersystem.com.

**HOW TO ESCAPE**

Three-quarters of families have no emergency escape routine, says the

American Red Cross, but yours doesn't have to be one of them. "Kids often wrongly assume it's safe to hide under the bed or in a closet," says Carli. To keep your loved ones from danger, here's an action plan:

**Map it out** Draw a room-by-room floor plan of your home to better visualize all possible exits.

**Prevent roadblocks** If the door in your bedroom is on fire, you'll need to take a detour—quickly. Brainstorm two ways to get out of each room.

**Keep an escape ladder upstairs** if you live in a two-story home. Make sure it's noncombustible and that it has been tested by an independent lab.

**Regroup** Meet at a spot that is a safe distance from the house (e.g., the mailbox or a neighbor's driveway).

**Rush** Create a sense of urgency by timing the drill with a stopwatch. "You could have as little as three minutes to get out," says Carli.

**Practice, practice** Hold drills at least twice a year—and make sure one is unannounced—because things can go wrong. "You might notice that one of your windows is stuck, or that the pile of clothes in the hallway made somebody trip," says Appy.

The Singletons, who now live in a two-story Riceville, TN, home credit their escape to daughter Beth Anne, now 15, who insisted on creating an emergency routine weeks before the fire for a school project. "Thank goodness she kept bugging us to do that," says Michelle. "Otherwise, we might not have survived." ■



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