

Homeowner Emergency Safety Tips



Have a first-aid manual on hand at all times. Emergencies can strike, despite the best precautions. You can prevent an emergency from becoming a catastrophe by learning what to do. This section discusses how to react during a fire, plumbing emergency, electrical emergency and gas leak.

Read this section and discuss it with all members of your household so that everyone is prepared for an emergency. You should also review this section with your household once a year so you are continually prepared for an emergency.

The first step during an electrical problem, water leak or gas leak is to shut off the flow of electricity, water or gas to your home. Every member of your household should know how to find these shutoff valves and switches.

You should keep basic emergency supplies such as a portable radio, a flashlight, extra batteries, a first-aid kit

These supplies will be welcomed if a natural disaster occurs. In addition, the first-aid kit and first-aid manual are good to have on hand for household use.

Emergency Shutoff Valve & Switch Locations

Main water shutoff valves are frequently located near water meters. Your water meter is likely outside near the street. Main water shutoff valves can also be located inside your home beneath a floor access panel or in a basement. Floor access panels are commonly found in closet floors. Look for a large valve in the middle of a pipe.

The main electrical disconnect should be located in or near the circuit panel box. The circuit panel box should be located in the garage, utility room, and utility closet or similar out of the way location.

If you have natural gas service, the gas shutoff valve will likely be located on the gas inlet pipe next to the gas meter.

Fire Precautions

Precautions and plans made today can prevent a fire-related tragedy tomorrow. Several steps for avoiding fire risks are discussed below. What to do if a fire does strike is also discussed.

Have A Plan Of Escape

The first step during a fire is to get everyone out of the house. Planning your escape routes now can prevent needless loss of life during a fire.

- Map out escape routes from each room in your home with your family. Pay particular attention to escape routes from bedrooms.
- Agree on a central area outside your house to meet after evacuation so that everyone can be accounted for. This may be a neighbor's front door or a neighborhood landmark. The meeting place should be a place that children or injured people can reach without undue difficulty and yet still be safe from danger. Meeting at the designated place can prevent a tragedy caused by not knowing whether everyone has escaped from the building.
- Have safety ladders near windows, if ladders are needed.
- Smoke detectors are an excellent early warning device. They are your first line of defense if a fire breaks out at night. Test your detectors on the first day of each month. Replace the batteries in the spring and fall when you change your clocks.
- Keep stairs, doorways and hallways free from obstructions. In dense smoke, it may be difficult to see items blocking an escape route.

Fire Extinguisher

Every kitchen should have a multipurpose fire extinguisher. Cooking is a leading cause of fire. If a fire breaks out in the kitchen, you will want an extinguisher close at hand. If there is a fire in another part of the home, you will know that an extinguisher can be found in the kitchen.

Read the operating instructions on the side of the extinguisher now so that you will know how to use it if needed. Finally, have the extinguisher serviced at the time recommended by the manufacturer. The manufacturer's service recommendations should be set out on the side of your fire extinguisher.

Avoiding Fire Risks

As discussed above, cooking is a major cause of fire. Cooking oil can ignite when it reaches the right temperature. Cooking oil can also splatter and ignite items near the stove. Pot holders, paper napkins, paper towels, curtains, loose clothes and long hair can catch fire in this manner. Do not leave frying pans unattended and keep the stove area clear of clutter.

Cigarette smoking is another leading cause of home fires. Never smoke in bed, do not rest ashtrays on chair arms and be careful when emptying ashtrays in the trash. Chimney fires can be avoided by regularly cleaning your chimney. Maintaining your chimney is discussed at this link. As an additional precaution, do not burn large amounts of newspaper or other paper in your fireplace or wood stove.

Other fires can be avoided by common sense precautions. Inspect electrical appliances for frayed wiring. Replace all defective appliance cords. Electrical maintenance and inspecting appliance cords are discussed at this link. Keep your garage clear of rubbish and wood shavings. Dispose of oily rags that can ignite by spontaneous combustion. Store flammable fuels, chemicals and paints outside.

In The Event Of Fire

If a fire breaks out, immediately:

- Get everyone out of the house.

- Meet at the designated area to count heads.
- Call the fire department from a neighbor's home.

If you discover a small fire that is still contained to its source, you can do the following:

Cooking pan fire.

Cover a small oil or grease fire in a cooking pan with a lid to smother the flames. Next, turn off heat to the pan. Do not use water on an oil or grease fire. Water will spread the flames. Turn off the kitchen exhaust fan. The fan can suck fire through the fan and ignite the outside of your home.

Oven fire.

Turn off the oven and allow the fire to burn itself out. Do not open the oven door - fresh air will feed the fire and cause it to continue to burn.

Electrical fires.

Do not use water on an electrical fire. Water and electricity can be fatal. If you discover an electrical fire early, use a multipurpose fire extinguisher. Otherwise, get everyone out of the house, meet at the designated area and call the fire department.

Plumbing Emergencies

During plumbing emergencies, the first step is to stop the flow of water immediately. Do this by turning off the main water shutoff valve or the shutoff valve for the particular fixture or appliance. You and each member of your family should know the location of these shutoff valves.

Locating the main water shutoff valve is discussed [this link](#). Shutoff valves for fixtures and appliances can usually be found underneath sinks and toilets and behind clothes washers, water heaters and other appliances.

If the emergency is limited to a specific appliance or fixture, look for its shutoff valve and close the valve by turning clockwise. Turn off the main shutoff valve if the problem is a leaking pipe or if there is no shutoff valve for the particular fixture or appliance.

Leaks

If a pipe leaks or breaks or if a joint should loosen, turn off the main shutoff valve to prevent water damage. If you turn off the main water supply, turn off your hot water heater by turning off the circuit breakers and the gas supply to the hot water heater. Failure to do so can cause the hot water heater to overheat, damage the heating elements and injure anyone who unknowingly turns on a hot water faucet.

Next, call a plumber or make temporary repairs yourself to stop the leak. Have the pipe replaced or the joint resoldered when it is convenient for a professional plumber to do so.

If your washing machine, dishwasher or other water-using appliance appears to leak, first check to see that the trap through which the appliance drains is completely open. Sometimes a partially-clogged drain can cause an overflow within the appliance. If the drain is clear, consult the appropriate appliance repair person.

Frozen Pipes

Pipe insulation and freeze-resistant outside faucets are available to reduce the risk of freezing. Even with these products, problems can still occur.

If a pipe should freeze, thaw the pipe slowly with a hair dryer or towels soaked in hot water. Heating the pipe slowly may prevent the pipe from breaking. Do not heat the pipe with a torch. This has been the cause of many fires. To prevent frozen pipes, drain water from outdoor faucets and pipes, remove and store outdoor hoses and never leave your home unheated during cold weather.

Clogged Drains

When the drain pipe from a tub, sink, shower or water-using appliance becomes clogged, turn off the faucet or appliance that flows into the drain. Next, try to remove the obstruction with a rubber plunger. The rubber cup of the plunger should cover the drain opening and the water should come well up over the edge of the cup. Work the plunger up and down rhythmically 10 to 20 times in succession to build up pressure in the pipe. This does more good than sporadic plunges. If the plunger does not work, call a plumber. Do not attempt using a snake or other tools. They can damage expensive fixtures. Never use drain cleaner to open a totally clogged drain. It will mix with the water to form a caustic solution.

Clogged Toilet

If a toilet overflows, stop the water flow by reaching inside the toilet tank and pushing the tank stopper down into its valve seat. Hold until the tank fills and the water stops. Next, turn off the shutoff valve underneath the toilet or turn off the main water shutoff valve. Unclog the toilet.

A clogged toilet should be treated almost the same as a clogged drain. The trap is built into the toilet and is therefore less accessible. Try to unclog the drain with a plunger. If that does not work, call a plumber.

Faucet Malfunction

If a faucet won't shut off, turn off the water at the shutoff valve underneath the sink immediately. If there is no valve, turn off the main water supply shutoff valve. Call a plumber or repair the faucet yourself. There are a number of plumbing repair books on the market for do-it-yourselfers.

You should not attempt to repair cartridge faucets yourself. These faucets are exceptionally advanced and quite expensive. Call a professional plumber if you have any problems with a cartridge faucet.

If steaming water flows from a hot water faucet, do not touch the hot water faucet. Leave the faucet running. Turn off the electricity or gas supply to the hot water heater. Let the faucet run until cold water flows from the faucet (the water in the hot water heater is no longer overheated), then call a plumbing professional to repair the faucet or the hot water heater's thermostat .

Electrical Emergencies

Electrical emergencies such as an appliance malfunction, a power failure in your home or a neighborhood power outage can occur at any time. Review the information below so you will know what to do if an electrical emergency strikes.

You should know how to turn off the electrical power to your home and turn off and reset individual circuit breakers.

If you have the skill to make electrical repairs, turn off the electrical power before making any repairs. Never work on a live circuit, fixture, receptacle or switch. Shut off the power first and test the circuit carefully with a circuit tester to be sure the power is turned off.

Instruction on electrical repairs is beyond the scope of this manual. If you do not have the skill and experience to make electrical repairs, call a professional electrician for service.

Main Disconnect

Turn off the electrical power to your house by shutting off the main disconnect. The main disconnect is one or more main fuses or circuit breakers located on the circuit panel.

If the circuit panel is located in a laundry room or some other place where there could be water on the floor, use rubber gloves when shutting off the main disconnect. Keep a pair of rubber gloves near the circuit panel at all times for this purpose.

Be sure everyone in your household knows where the circuit breaker panel is located and can shut off the power.

Power Outage

If the power goes out suddenly in your home, decide whether the outage affects just your home or the entire neighborhood. If it is a neighborhood outage, notify your electrical utility.

If the electrical outage affects your home only, check for and reset tripped circuit breakers. If a breaker immediately trips again, call a professional electrician to test your electrical system.

Turn off or disconnect all motor-driven and electronic appliances to avoid possible damage from either inadequate power or a sudden electrical surge when power is restored. The furnace blower motor can be turned off by turning off the circuit breaker for the furnace.

Motors for dishwashers, clothes washers, clothes dryers, garbage disposals, range fans, sump pumps, refrigerators and other appliances can be disconnected by turning off or unplugging the appliance. Computers, televisions, video recorders, stereos and other electronic equipment should also be turned off. Turn on a radio and a lamp to alert you when service is restored.

After power has been restored, it should be safe to turn on all appliances. You can retard food spoilage by not opening refrigerators or freezers during the outage unless absolutely necessary. Food in a tightly packed freezer will stay frozen for up to 48 hours if the door has been kept closed. Food in a partially filled freezer may keep for 24 hours. If you are in doubt about the safety of frozen food after a power outage, throw it out.

Always have flashlights, extra batteries, candles, matches and a battery-powered transistor radio handy in case of power failures. Store these items in an accessible place known to all family members. If any of these items are used for any other purpose, make sure they are promptly returned. Finally, keep lit candles away from drafts, flammable objects and children.

Sparking Appliance

Do not touch a smoking or sparking appliance. Instead, cut off power to the appliance by unplugging the appliance, turning off the wall switch controlling the appliance or turning off the circuit breaker for the appliance. Allow the appliance to cool, then take it to a repair shop or call a professional service representative to repair the appliance.

If the appliance catches fire, get everyone out of the house, meet at your designated area (see link) and call the fire department from a neighbor's home. Do not use water on an electrical fire, it can be fatal. If you discover an electrical fire early, use a multipurpose fire extinguisher on the flames.

If an appliance's electrical plug smokes or sparks, unplug the appliance by pulling its cord. Do not touch the plug itself. After the plug cools, inspect the plug and cord for damage. If they are damaged, replace the plug and cord or have them replaced by a professional service representative. Reset any tripped circuit breakers.

If the plug and cord appear to be OK and there are no tripped circuit breakers, the electrical outlet may be at fault. Test the outlet by plugging another appliance you know works properly into the receptacle. If that plug sparks too, replace the outlet or have it replaced by a professional electrician. If the new appliance does not cause sparks, then the original appliance is probably faulty and should be repaired or replaced.

Gas Leaks

Your home may be serviced with natural or bottled gas. Gas is a safe, clean, economical energy source for appliances such as furnaces, boilers, water heaters, dryers, cooktops, fireplaces and barbecues. Although gas appliances are wonderful conveniences, gas must be treated with respect.

If you smell gas inside or outside your home, hear gas escaping from a broken line or see a broken gas line, you should:

- Get everyone out of and away from your home immediately.
- Call your local gas company or your fire department from a neighbor's house.
- Do not light a match, turn a light on or off, use a telephone (portable, cellular or regular) or operate any electrical switch or electronic device - flames or electric sparks can ignite the leaking gas.
- Leave as many windows and doors open as possible - the gas will rise and dissipate harmlessly outside.

If the gas leak is inside your home, you can turn off your gas supply at the gas shutoff valve after everyone is out of the house. If you prefer, you can have your utility company turn off the gas.

The gas shutoff valve should be located on the pipe leading into the gas meter. Turn the valve a quarter-turn in either direction with an adjustable-end or "crescent" wrench. The gas is off when the valve is perpendicular to the pipe. If the gas leak is outside your home, keep away from the leak area and away from your house. Do not attempt to shut off the gas supply. Your utility company will turn off the gas.

Once your gas is off, wait for your local gas company to restore your service.