

Replacing Your Smoke Detectors

By Rick Bunzel

Having a smoke detector cuts your chance of dying in a house fire by nearly in half. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) in three of every 10 reported fires in homes equipped with smoke alarms, the devices did not work. Households with non-working smoke detectors now outnumber those with no smoke detectors. What good are smoke detectors that don't work? Did you know that you should replace your smoke detector after its ten years old? Recent studies have show that older detectors are slower to react to fires. Older smoke detectors are also estimated to have a 30% probability of failure within the first 10 years. Newer smoke detectors do better, but should be replaced after 10 years. Just pushing the test button is no guarantee that an older smoke detector is 100% functional as the test button just ensures the battery sounds the warning horn.

Today several different types of smoke detectors can be purchased. Once one had to decided which type of sensor they want in their smoke detector: ionization or photocell. Today, dual sensor detectors are available for little more than a single sensor model. Smoke detectors can also be found with automatic lights, combination smoke and carbon monoxide detector and detectors for deaf or hearing impaired.

Upgrading your smoke detectors is easy and inexpensive. You can purchase highly effective dual sensor smoke detectors for under \$30. *Consumer Reports* recommends First Alert Double Sensor SA301B/C and Firex Dual Sensor CCPB-04021. They also recommend the First Alert 10-year Lithium SA10YR. The SA10YR is less sensitive with a single sensor but has a battery that lasts 10 years, which is also the effective life of the unit.

Today, the NFPA recommends a smoke detector inside each bedroom and one on each floor. For the elderly I would also recommend one outside the kitchen equipped with a silence feature. Frequently the elderly forget they started to cook something and get distracted. The silence feature or hush button will keep them from removing the battery when those accidents do happen. Placement especially for those smoke detectors is important. It should be within several feet of the kitchen preferable in a hallway just outside of the kitchen. Smoke detectors do not have to be mounted on the ceiling. They can be mounted on a wall 4-12 inches from the ceiling. Preferable the hush button can be reached without a stool or chair.

Smoke Detectors require very little maintenance but do need to be dusted occasionally. Make sure you follow the manufacturer's instructions about

cleaning. Combine cleaning and with the bi-annual battery change. Cobwebs and dust usually can be removed with a vacuum cleaner attachment. If you are going to be doing work nearby that could send dust in the air, cover the detector with a shield. Also, shield the detector if you are painting around it, and never paint on it. Remove the shield promptly after work is completed.

If you have smoke detectors but they are in difficult to reach places, consider just changing to lithium 9-volt batteries. These batteries will last 10 years in most smoke detectors. Lithium 9-volt batteries are ideal for the elderly as they can have difficulty getting to the detectors.

If you are not sure how old your smoke detector is, use this simple rule: if the plastic shell has turned yellow, most likely it is more than 8 years old and is due to be replaced.

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