



Practicle Guide



Smoke Alarms

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Smoke alarms

Many fire related deaths are caused by people being overcome by smoke and fumes, not just burns.

Therefore, a working smoke alarm is essential. It provides vital early warning and extra time to escape if there is a fire. Every home should have at least one working smoke alarm. They cost around £5 and can be bought at most supermarkets, DIY stores and electrical equipment shops.

Alternatively, Fire and Rescue Services offer all householders a free home fire safety visit. Get in touch and they will visit your home, provide fire safety advice and fit free smoke alarms if you need them.

- [Choosing a smoke alarm and installing it](#)
- [Types of smoke alarm](#)
- [Where not to fit your smoke alarm](#)
- [Testing your smoke alarm](#)
- [Replacement](#)
- [Smoke alarms for the deaf](#)
- [Remember](#)

Choosing a smoke alarm and installing it

- Choose a smoke alarm that complies with the British Standard (BS) 5446 part 1 and carries the British Standard Kitemark or PCB 'Horseshoe' mark.
- Always put smoke alarms where you will be able to hear them throughout the home, particularly when you are asleep or when doors are closed.
- If your home has only one level (storey), fit the alarm between the living area and bedrooms.
- If your home has more than one level (storey), fit one alarm at the bottom of the staircase and further alarms on each landing.
- Fit smoke alarms on the ceiling, as near as possible to the centre of the room, hallway or landing. The smoke alarm should be at least 30cm (12 inches) away from any wall or light fitting.
- Make sure you can reach your smoke alarm easily to test it each week – avoid fitting it directly over a staircase.
- Follow the manufacturers' instructions on how to fit your smoke alarm and change the battery.



Types of smoke Alarm

There are three types of smoke alarm currently on the market - ionisation, optical (also described as photo electronic) and combined.

- **Ionisation:** These are the cheapest and cost very little to purchase. They are very sensitive to small particles of smoke produced by flaming fires, such as chip pans, and will detect this type of fire before the smoke gets too thick. They are marginally less sensitive to slow burning and smouldering fires which give off larger quantities of smoke before flaming occurs.
- **Optical:** These are more expensive but more effective at detecting larger particles of smoke produced by slow-burning fires, such as smouldering foam-filled upholstery and overheated PVC wiring. They are marginally less sensitive to free burning flaming fires.
- **Combined:** These detectors are effective at detecting slow-burning as well as flaming fires - which are both common types of fire.

Where not to fit your smoke alarm

- Don't fit your smoke alarm in or near to the kitchen or bathroom as it could be set off accidentally by cooking fumes and steam.
- Don't fit your smoke alarm in a garage where it could be set off accidentally by exhaust fumes.
- Don't fit your smoke alarm on damp or dusty surfaces or false ceilings as there is a risk it will fall down.

Testing your smoke alarm

When a smoke alarm has been fitted it is vital that you test it regularly to ensure it works properly.

- **Once a week** Test your smoke alarm each week using the test button.
- **Every six months** Every six months, open the case and gently vacuum the inside to remove dust from the sensor. If the smoke alarm doesn't open, vacuum through the holes.
- **Once a year** Change the battery every year (unless it is a ten year alarm) or when you need to.

Replacement

Replace the battery in your smoke alarm if the low battery warning sounds (an intermittent bleep). It is also best to replace smoke alarms with completely new units after 10 years.

Smoke alarms for the deaf

You can also buy smoke alarms that have a vibrating pad or a flashing light if you have difficulty hearing. The Royal National Institute for the Deaf can provide detailed information.



Remember:

Buying and fitting smoke alarms, and ensuring they are carefully and properly maintained, could give you those precious few extra minutes in which to make your escape safely.

Plan an escape from your home in advance and talk about it with your family. If a fire occurs you may have to get out in the dark and difficult conditions. Escaping will be a lot easier if everyone knows where to go. Make sure your routes remain free of any obstructions and that there are no loose floor coverings that could trip you.

Always check the battery regularly, replacing it when necessary, and never remove it for other purposes.

