

# Fire Safety for Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing account for a significant portion of the population. Currently about one sixth of the U.S. population (i.e. about 40 million individuals) have some degree of hearing loss.<sup>1</sup> These Americans may be unable to rely on the warning sound of a smoke alarm to alert them of fire. It is crucial that this audience is aware of the availability of flashing or vibrating smoke alarms, and the importance of proper home fire escape planning. Local fire departments need to be sure this information is available and conduct outreach to people with hearing loss as part of their regular and ongoing life safety education.

## Why are deaf or hard of hearing persons at risk?

- Decreased hearing or loss of hearing often limits a person's ability to hear smoke alarms, take quick action, and escape during a fire.
- Most people remove their hearing aids and cochlear implants when they sleep. Often, this means they won't hear a smoke alarm.
- Most hard of hearing people are not aware of the availability and importance of special smoke alarms. They often cannot afford to buy and have them installed.
- Many times the smoke alarms that are marketed for people with hearing loss do not meet the standards of minimum brightness of the strobe light or loudness in the smoke alarm.
- Depending on the degree of hearing loss and potential additional physical limitations, many of the actions an individual can take to protect themselves from the dangers of fire may require specialized visual smoke alarms and help from a family member, caretaker, neighbor, or outside source. Each deaf or hard of hearing person, whether living alone or with family, needs to be aware of how vulnerable they are during a fire. They need to have equipment and an escape plan/process in place so they can evacuate as quickly as possible.

**The Office of State Fire Marshal encourages the deaf and hard of hearing population to practice the following safety tips.**

## Install and maintain smoke alarms

Deaf or hard of hearing persons cannot rely on the traditional audible smoke alarm, but can rely on smoke alarms equipped with alternative alerting devices.

- Install a strobe/flashing (visual) or shaker/vibrating (tactile) smoke alarm on every level of your home and in your sleeping area. Ideally, these smoke alarms would be interconnected so that if smoke is sensed in one area of the house, the person with hearing loss will be alerted in all areas of the house. Strobe/flashing smoke alarms are not recommended if you have a seizure disorder.
- Test all smoke alarms monthly. Your chances of surviving a home fire are far greater if you have the initial warning from a smoke alarm.

## Plan your home escape

- Draw escape routes from all areas of the house, if possible.
- Plan two routes out of each room.
- Pick a place outside to meet, safely away from the house.
- Once everyone is safe, find a phone and dial 9-1-1 or have a neighbor call. Amplified phones or TTY may not be available once you are outside the house.
- Practice – don't just talk about it – practice your home fire escape plan at least twice a year:
  - ♦ At night when the lights are off.
  - ♦ A surprise drill in the morning.
  - ♦ On hands and knees to simulate being surrounded by smoke.
  - ♦ Include everyone in your home.
- Make sure doors are not blocked, windows are not stuck, screens can be taken out quickly and any security bars can be properly opened.
- Keep essential items, such as walkers, canes, glasses or hearing aids at the bedside.

## In case of fire

- When a smoke alarm sounds, get out of the house.
- When a fire occurs, do not waste time saving personal property or pets.
- If you must escape through smoke, remember to crawl low, under smoke.
- Never open doors that are hot to the touch.
- Designate a meeting place outside the building and take attendance.
- Once out, stay out! Remember to escape first; then call 9-1-1.

## Don't isolate yourself

- Be sure to inform family members, the building manager, or a neighbor of your home fire escape plan and practice it with them.
- Contact your local fire department on a non-emergency telephone number (use appropriate amplified phone or TTY devices if necessary) and explain your special needs. Your local fire department may be able to help you with your home fire escape plan and may also be able to perform a home inspection. The fire department may also offer suggestions about what type of smoke alarms will work for you and where you can get them. They also will explain correct placement. For a list of Oregon fire departments, visit: [www.oregon.gov/OSP/SFM/Fire\\_Department\\_List.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/OSP/SFM/Fire_Department_List.shtml)

## Know your abilities

**Remember, fire safety is your personal responsibility. Home Fire Safety is Up to You!**

Learn about tools and resources to help deaf or hard of hearing persons deal with the danger of home fires. Attend your fire department's open house, programs and orientations. Make sure your special needs are known.

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<sup>i</sup> Blanchfield BB, Feldman JJ, Dunbar JL, Gardner EN. The severely to profoundly hearing-impaired population in the United States: prevalence estimates and demographics. J Am Acad Audiol 2001;12:183-9.