

Fire Escape Planning for Apartment Dwellers

Fire drills are important for all homes, including apartment buildings and other high-rise structures. You need to know the basics of escape planning, from identifying two ways out of every room and “getting low and going” to avoid toxic smoke, fire exits and exit pathways, and practicing how you would respond in an emergency. Be aware that sometimes the safest thing you can do in a tall building fire is to stay put and wait for the firefighters. Here are some tips for apartment dwellers:

Know the plan - Make sure that you're familiar with your building's evacuation plan, which should illustrate what residents are supposed to do in the event of an emergency. The evacuation plan should be posted in places where all residents can see and review, and the building management should hold a fire drill with occupants at least once a year. The Alberta Fire Code also requires that buildings periodically test their fire safety systems. Be sure to participate when fire drills are conducted in your building.

Practice is key - Whether your building has one floor or 50, it's essential that you and your family be prepared to respond to a fire alarm. Identify all of the exits in your building and if you are using an escape-planning grid, mark them on your escape plan. Make sure to mark the various stairways too, in case one is blocked by fire.

Never use the elevator - In case of fire, always use the stairs to get out, never the elevator. Make sure to practice using the stairs as part of your escape plan. If someone in your family has difficulty climbing down steps, make sure you recognize this in your plan.

Stay low - Smoke from a fire is toxic and deadly no matter what kind of structure you live in. When you hold your fire drill, all family members should practice “getting low under smoke and going” towards exits or to the outside of the building.

Seal yourself in for safety - If you can't leave your apartment due to smoke or fire in the hallway or stairwells, call the fire department to report your exact location and gather in a room with a window to await arrival of firefighters. Close all doors between you and the fire. Use duct tape or wet towels to create a seal around the door and over air vents in order to keep smoke from coming in.

Stay by the window - If you must seal yourself in a room, open your windows at the top and the bottom, if possible, so fresh air can get in. Don't break the window—if smoke enters the room from outside the building, you won't be able to protect yourself.

Signal to firefighters - Wave a flashlight or light coloured cloth out the window to let the firefighters know where you are located.