

Safe as Houses: A spring checklist for homeowners

It's almost time for our clocks to "spring forward" again to mark the real beginning of our sunny season. We've become accustomed to the habit of using the "changing of the clocks" as a reminder to check the batteries in our smoke detectors. It's good advice – this is an important semi-annual task that can help keep your family safe. But why not also take the opportunity to do a home safety inspection? Get the whole family involved: review your emergency plan and offer age-appropriate explanations and directions to your children.

• **The Big Three:** Smoke alarms, fire extinguishers, and carbon monoxide alarms. These three devices are your number one priority. Make sure you have at least one of each on every living level – it is now the law that you must have smoke detectors on each level, and there could be insurance problems if you do not!

• **Change the batteries when you change the clocks.** This isn't a battery "check" by the way. Whether or not the batteries are still working, they should be replaced with new batteries. Save the used batteries for a child's toy or other device. They may have some useful life left, but your own life won't be dependent on them working for another six months. Replace alarm batteries twice a year – when you change your clocks for daylight savings time. While you're circling the house with your box of batteries, take the time to check the expiry dates on your extinguishers. Get the kids to help on this semi-annual exercise, and chat about what they should do if they hear the smoke detector.

• **Check detector locations.** If you're tempted to take batteries out of smoke alarms because they activate with regular cooking tasks – or everytime you light a fire in the fireplace for guests – then you should consider moving the alarm to a less sensitive position. Keep in mind that fires can begin at the kitchen stove, or at an untended fireplace. Moving the detectors too far away defeats the purpose. Be sensible about your safety.

• **Fire routes.** Practice exit strategies with your children at least twice a year. Ideally, each room should have two exits; if one is blocked by fire, another is available. Tell your children never to hide in closets or under beds, and not to stop to collect their favourite belongings. And remind them that the safest air is down low – since smoke rises. And the children should know where the family "meeting spot" will be, outside the home. Odds are you will never have to use this knowledge – but it is comforting to know that you are well prepared.

• **Clean chimneys.** If you have a woodstove or fireplace – you should have it inspected and cleaned every year. Book your appointment on clock-changing day so you won't forget. Always, of course, burn well-seasoned wood: never green wood or garbage, which can cause dangerous creosote buildups in your chimney.

• **Banish mould.** Home health includes healthy air. Use fans and a dehumidifier to improve air circulation and quality wherever necessary. Check your equipment during your home safety inspection – ensuring that bathrooms and kitchens are well ventilated. If you do see or smell mildew anywhere – take immediate action to eradicate it with diluted bleach. (And check your kitchen exhaust system for grease buildups – another potential fire hazard!)

• **"Slip check"**. Indoors and outdoors, you want to be able to walk safely. Keep your indoor stairways slip-free and clear; make it a firm rule that no one is allowed to put anything, anytime, on the stairs. Outdoors, keep your pathways and doors well lit. Timers are great for outdoor lights; you save energy, and you're assured of light when you need it.

This spring, make your home safety inspection a part of "changing the clocks" day. Your kids will come to expect this little seasonal ritual, they'll develop good habits and "safety sense", and your whole family will be better prepared and better protected!



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