

# 7 Steps to Better Fire Safety: Home Checklist

By Roy Berendsohn



The myth that the 1871 Great Chicago Fire started with a cow kicking over a lantern has been thoroughly debunked, but feel free to eat steak in revenge anyway. Then do this stuff:

## 1. Put fresh batteries in smoke detectors and test the devices.

Although modern AA batteries and 9-volts typically last longer than a year, replacing them is still a good idea. Besides, if they're more than a year old, they may be living on borrowed time and the detector will emit an annoying beep when the battery wears out.

## 2. Replace smoke detectors that are erratic or more than 10 years old.

Although smoke detectors contain a tiny amount of nuclear material (Americium 241) the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission does not require homeowners to dispose of the detectors through any other means other than putting them out with household trash. You may feel it's more responsible to return the device to the manufacturer. We chose one manufacturer arbitrarily, First Alert, to check what its requirements are, and called its customer service department. We were told to simply box up the device and return it without any disassembly (you can remove the battery, of course). Contact the manufacturer of your specific detector to learn what's up.

## 3. Install fire extinguishers in the kitchen, workshop and garage.

Your best bet is still the venerable ABC extinguisher, a product that will handle any household fire from paper and grease to electrical shorts. Keep it handy, not stored behind groceries, tools or plain old junk.

## 4. Inspect storage containers.

Any gas can leak if its base wears through after years of scraping across a rough concrete floor. Likewise, small gas engine power equipment can leak fuel, especially when turned over so that the gas cap is facing down or to the side. We recently saw a string trimmer spill its gas/oil mixture on a garage floor this way — it wasn't pretty.

## 5. Be safe with extension cords.

This seems self-explanatory, but it bears repeating: Extension cords have a fixed service life, and they do wear out. Their ends loosen and their outer sheath can be damaged. Never use an extension cord under a rug or stapled to a wall in lieu of safely installed building wire. Conversely, never use conventional electrical cable to make an extension cord. The solid copper conductors in this type of cable don't stand up well to repeated bending and unbending. In fact, they undergo a process called work hardening. Everywhere the copper work hardens, it will form a hot spot when current passes through it. Finally, the sheath on conventional building wire is not tough enough to withstand sunlight, water and dirt.

## 6. Discard oily shop rags.

Oily rags become a combustion hazard. Keep them in a steel waste container or hang them up so solvents can evaporate from them, then dispose of them as soon as possible.

## 7. Remove everything from around combustion appliances.

Combustion tools need air to flow to them and around them to operate with maximum energy efficiency and safety. Pile your boxes and papers elsewhere, not around combustion water heaters, furnaces or boilers. The only thing around the appliances should be, well, nothing.