

# Limitations of Fire Alarm Systems

Manufacturer recommends that smoke and/or heat detectors be located throughout a protected premise following the recommendations of the current edition of the National Fire Protection Association Standard 72, National Fire Alarm Code (NFPA 72), manufacturer's recommendations, state and local codes, and the recommendations contained in Guide for the Proper Use of System Smoke Detectors, which is made available at no charge to all installing dealers. A study by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (an agency of the United States government) indicated that smoke detectors may not go off or give early warning in as many as 35% of all fires. While fire alarm systems are designed to provide warning against fire, they do not guarantee warning or protection against fire. Any alarm system is subject to compromise or failure to warn for a variety of reasons. For example:

- Particles of combustion or “smoke” from a developing fire may not reach the sensing chambers of the smoke detector because:
  - Barriers such as closed or partially closed doors, walls, or chimneys may inhibit flow.
  - Smoke particles may become “cold” and stratify, and may not reach the ceiling or upper walls where detectors are located.
  - Smoke particles may be blown away from detectors by air outlets.
  - Smoke particles may be drawn into air returns before reaching the detector.

In general, smoke detectors on one level of a structure cannot be expected to sense fires developing on another level.

- The amount of “smoke” present may be insufficient to alarm smoke detectors. Smoke detectors are designed to alarm at various levels of smoke density. If such density levels are not created by a developing fire at the location of detectors, the detectors will not go into alarm.
- Smoke detectors, even when working properly, have sensing limitations. Detectors that have photoelectronic sensing chambers tend to detect smoldering fires better than flaming fires, which have little visible smoke. Detectors that have ionizing-type sensing chambers tend to detect fast flaming fires better than smoldering fires. Because fires develop in different ways and are often unpredictable in their growth, neither type of detector is necessarily best and a given type of detector may not provide adequate warning of a fire.
- Smoke detectors are subject to false alarms and nuisance alarms. For example, a smoke detector located in or near a kitchen may go into nuisance alarm during normal operation of kitchen appliances. In addition, dusty or steamy environments may cause a smoke detector to falsely alarm. If the location of a smoke detector causes an abundance of false alarms or nuisance alarms, do not disconnect the smoke detector; call a professional to analyze the situation and recommend a solution.
- Smoke detectors cannot be expected to provide adequate warning of fires caused by arson, children playing with matches (especially within bedrooms), smoking in bed, violent explosions (caused by escaping gas, improper storage of flammable materials, etc.).

- Heat detectors do not sense particles of combustion and are designed to alarm only when heat on their sensors increase at a predetermined rate or reaches a predetermined level. Heat detectors are designed to protect property, not life.
- Warning devices (including horns, sirens, and bells) may not alert people or wake up sleepers who are located on the other side of closed or partially open doors. A warning device that activates on a different floor or level of a dwelling or structure is less likely to awaken or alert people. Even persons who are awake may not notice the warning if the alarm is muffled by noise from a stereo, radio, air conditioner or other appliance, or by passing traffic. Audible warning devices may not alert the hearing-impaired (strobes or other devices should be provided to warn these people). Any warning device may fail to alert people with a disability, deep sleepers, people who have recently used alcohol or drugs, or people on medication or sleeping pills.
  - Please note that:
    - i) Strobes can, under certain circumstances, cause seizures in people with conditions such as epilepsy.
    - ii) Studies have shown that certain people, even when they hear a fire alarm signal, do not respond or comprehend the meaning of the signal. It is the property owner's responsibility to conduct fire drills and other training exercises to make people aware of fire alarm signals and instruct on the proper reaction to alarm signals.
    - iii) In rare instances, the sounding of a warning device can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss.
- Telephone lines needed to transmit alarm signals from a premises to a central station may be out of service or temporarily out of service. For added protection against telephone line failure, backup radio transmission systems are recommended.
- System components, though designed to last many years, can fail at any time. As a precautionary measure, it is recommended that smoke detectors be checked, maintained, and replaced per manufacturer's recommendations.
- System components will not work without electrical power. If system batteries are not serviced or replaced regularly, they may not provide battery backup when AC power fails.
- Environments with high air velocity or that are dusty or dirty require more frequent maintenance.

In general, fire alarm systems and devices will not work without power and will not function properly unless they are maintained and tested regularly.

While installing a fire alarm system may make the owner eligible for a lower insurance rate, an alarm system is not a substitute for insurance. Property owners should continue to act prudently in protecting the premises and the people in the premises and should properly insure life and property and buy sufficient amounts of liability insurance to meet their needs.

## Requirements and recommendations for proper use of fire alarm systems including smoke detectors and other fire alarm devices:

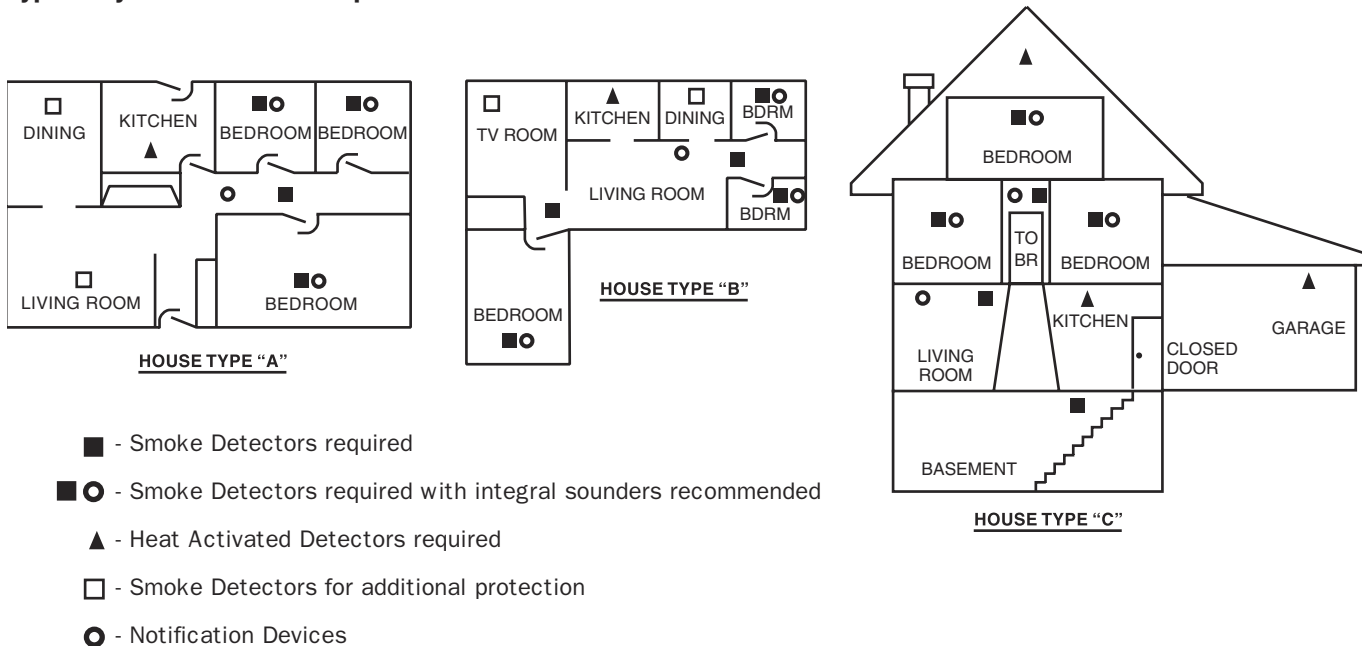
Early fire detection is best achieved by the installation and maintenance of fire detection equipment in all rooms and areas of the house or building in accordance with the requirements and recommendations of the current edition of the National Fire Protection Association Standard 72, National Fire Alarm Code (NFPA 72), the manufacturer's recommendations, State and local codes and the recommendations contained in Guide for the Proper Use of System Smoke Detectors, which is made available at no charge to all installing dealers. For specific requirements, check with the local Authority Having Jurisdiction (ex. Fire Chief) for fire protection systems.

### Requirements and Recommendations include:

- For residential applications, smoke detectors shall be installed outside of each separate sleeping area in the immediate vicinity of the bedrooms and on each additional story of the family living unit, including basements and excluding crawl spaces and unfinished attics.
- Smoke detectors shall be installed in sleeping rooms in new construction and it is recommended that they shall also be installed in sleeping rooms in existing construction.
- It is recommended that more than one smoke detector shall be installed in a hallway if it is more than 30 feet long.
- It is recommended that there shall never be less than two smoke detectors per apartment or residence.

- It is recommended that smoke detectors be located in any room where an alarm control is located, or in any room where alarm control connections to an AC source or phone lines are made. If detectors are not so located, a fire within the room could prevent the control from reporting a fire.
- All fire alarm systems require notification devices, including sirens, bells, horns, and/or strobes. In residential applications, each automatic alarm initiating device when activated shall cause the operation of an alarm notification device that shall be clearly audible in all bedrooms over ambient or background noise levels (at least 15dB above noise) with all intervening doors closed.
- It is recommended that a smoke detector with an integral sounder (smoke alarm) be located in every bedroom and an additional notification device be located on each level of a residence.
- To keep your fire alarm system in excellent working order, ongoing maintenance is required per the manufacturer's recommendations and UL and NFPA standards. At a minimum the requirements of Chapter 7 of NFPA 72 shall be followed. A maintenance agreement should be arranged through the local manufacturer's representative. Maintenance should be performed annually by authorized personnel only.
- The most common cause of an alarm system not functioning when a fire occurs is inadequate maintenance. As such, the alarm system should be tested weekly to make sure all sensors and transmitters are working properly.
- Although designed for long life, fire alarm devices including smoke detectors may fail at any time. It is recommended that residential smoke detectors shall be replaced every 10 years.
- Any smoke detector, fire alarm system or any component of that system which fails shall be repaired or replaced immediately.

### Typical System Installations per NFPA 72



**As of January 2000, this document supersedes any previous liability information enclosed with this product.**