

Fire safety: You may not be as prepared as you think

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



I thought I was reasonably prepared for the horrifying possibility of a house fire. I've taught my kids to make sure their door is cool before opening it, to crawl below the smoke, and to stay out of the closet so that the firefighters can find them. I have smoke alarms in every room -- the kind that talk to you, which have been shown to be slightly better at awakening children. I even had escape ladders stored in each upstairs bedroom. I thought I was set.

Today I learned an important lesson.

It has been on my 'to do' list for a long time to open up the escape ladders and toss them out the window, just to be sure that it all works as planned. Today I actually did it.

My husband flung himself out the window and scaled down the side of our house. Actually it wasn't quite as graceful as that sounds. The skinny, metal ladder is much smaller than we anticipated and significantly less stable, so it was more like he bumped and swayed until he mercifully reached the ground, somewhat surprised that he hadn't fallen and broken both legs. The ladder wasn't as securely attached to the house as I expected. When I read the instructions I was surprised to discover that this ladder was only approved for windowsills that were less than 11 inches deep. I measured. Ours was 14 inches. Oops.

We tried the ladder in the children's room next. It was even worse. This one, with its larger plastic steps, looked easier to use. And it would have been if it actually fit over the windowsill. It was also designed for a smaller window and because of the shape of the handles, it simply didn't work at all on our house. The first Chiamonte who tried to escape a fire using this ladder would have fallen, ladder in hand, to the ground, stranding

the rest of the family in the burning house. Oops.

It never occurred to me that the safety tools that I had so diligently purchased were essentially useless to me. I am so grateful that I made this discovery on a relaxing spring afternoon rather than in the middle of a life altering panic.

No one wants to think that they will endure a house fire. You will most likely live your entire life and never face this particular tragedy. But shouldn't you be prepared just in case? Here is what I suggest:

- Smoke detectors. Smoke detectors. Smoke detectors. Never disable them. Change the batteries twice a year. Place one on every floor at the very least. It is also prudent to have one in every bedroom in case a fire starts there.
- Tell your children what they should do if they discover a fire in the house. Discuss escape routes and a meeting place outside of the house.
- Get escape ladders and put one in every bedroom. Measure your windowsills and if they are deeper than 10 inches, be sure to get one that is approved for larger windows. Be aware that some ladders are 'one use only' so don't toss them out the window for a test (as we did) without reading the directions first. Decide, in advance, the order in which your family members will escape.

I hope that none of us ever awakens to smoke in our home. But if we do, and we have planned our escape in advance, we will simply gather up our loved ones, throw one leg out the window and crawl down to safety.

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