

RESIDENT FIRE AND LIFE SAFETY GUIDE

Apartments · Condominiums
San Mateo Consolidated Fire Department

In multi-family buildings, your neighbor's fire is your fire. The habits below protect your household and everyone who shares your walls, floors, and ceilings.

Open Flames, Barbecues, and Candles

- **Never leave an open flame unattended.** Not a barbecue, not a candle, not a burner, not a fire pit. The most common sentence we hear after a fire is that someone stepped away for a minute.
- **Barbecues on balconies and decks are restricted.** California Fire Code Section 308.1.4 prohibits charcoal, wood, and most propane grills on combustible balconies or within 10 feet of combustible construction at multi-family buildings. Limited exceptions exist for fully sprinklered buildings and for LP-gas containers of 2½ pounds water capacity or less. Check with your property manager before using any grill, because your building may be more restrictive.
- **Use designated common-area barbecue stations where they are provided.**
- **Store propane cylinders only in designated outdoor storage areas, upright and in a well-ventilated location away from building openings.** Never store them inside a unit, in an attached garage, or in an enclosed storage locker.
- **Let charcoal cool completely for at least 48 hours before disposal.** Never dump ashes into a trash chute, plastic bin, or planter.
- **Candles:** keep at least 12 inches from anything that can burn, place them on a sturdy non-combustible surface, keep them away from children and pets, and extinguish every candle before leaving the room or going to sleep.
- **Consider flameless LED candles.** They produce the same effect with none of the risk, and many buildings now require them.
- **Dispose of smoking materials in a sturdy, non-combustible ashtray with water.** Never discard them in planters, potted soil, or over a balcony rail.

Safe Cooking

- **Cooking is the number one cause of home fires.** Stay in the kitchen while frying, grilling, or broiling. If you must leave, turn the burner off.
- **Keep towels, packaging, potholders, and curtains at least three feet from the cooktop, and keep pot handles turned inward.**
- **For a pan fire:** slide a lid over the pan, turn off the heat, and leave it covered until fully cool. Never move a burning pan, and never put water on a grease fire.
- **For an oven or microwave fire, keep the door closed and turn the appliance off.**
- **If the fire does not go out immediately, get out, close the door behind you, and call 911 from a safe location.**
- **Never disable your smoke alarm because it activates while you cook.** Use the exhaust fan, open a window, and use the alarm's hush button if it has one.
- **If cooking smoke fills your unit, open a window rather than your door to the hallway.** Corridor smoke can activate the building fire alarm, trigger a full evacuation, and bring a fire department response. If there is an actual fire, activate the alarm immediately and call 911.

Smoke Alarms and Carbon Monoxide Alarms

Where they go

- **Smoke alarms:** inside every bedroom, immediately outside each sleeping area, and on every level of the unit, including basements.
- **Carbon monoxide alarms:** outside each sleeping area and on every level. CO alarms are required in any unit with a gas appliance, fireplace, or attached garage.
- **Smoke alarms:** mount on the ceiling, or high on the wall no more than 12 inches below the ceiling. Keep them at least 10 feet from cooking appliances to reduce nuisance activations, and out of the direct path of vents, fans, and windows.
- **Carbon monoxide alarms:** carbon monoxide mixes evenly with room air, so it does not need to be at the ceiling. Mount the alarm at the height in the manufacturer's instructions, and keep it away from fuel-burning appliances by the distance those instructions give. A combination smoke and carbon monoxide alarm follows the smoke alarm rules.

Keeping them working

- **Test every alarm monthly using the test button.**
- **Replace standard batteries at least once a year, or immediately when the alarm chirps.** Sealed 10-year lithium alarms are not opened. The whole unit is replaced when it signals end of life.
- **Replace the alarm itself:** smoke alarms at 10 years from the manufacture date printed on the back, CO alarms per the manufacturer's listed service life, typically 5 to 10 years.
- **Never remove a battery or disable an alarm.** If you rent, report any missing, chirping, or non-working alarm to your property manager in writing and keep a copy. The property owner is responsible for repairing or replacing it. If you own your unit, replace it promptly.
- **If a CO alarm sounds:** get everyone outside to fresh air immediately and call 911. Do not search for the source yourself.

Fire Doors and Exit Paths

- **Never prop, wedge, or block a corridor or stairwell door.** These doors are engineered to hold back smoke and fire long enough for your neighbors to escape. A door held open by a doorstop, a shoe, or a package defeats the entire system.
- **Keep hallways, stairwells, landings, and exit doors clear of bicycles, strollers, furniture, shoe racks, and storage.** These items become obstacles in zero visibility and fuel in a fire.
- **Report any door that will not close and latch on its own, and any locked or blocked exit, to your property manager immediately.**
- **Close your own unit door behind you when you evacuate.** A closed door dramatically slows fire and smoke spread.

When the Fire Alarm Sounds

- **Treat every alarm as real.** Get up, get out, and stay out.
- **Before opening any door, feel it with the back of your hand.** If the door or handle is hot, or if you see smoke at the base of the door, keep it closed and use your second exit.
- **Use the stairs. Never use an elevator.** Elevators can open on the fire floor or lose power with you inside.
- **Stay low if there is smoke.** The cleanest air is near the floor.
- **Know two ways out from your unit and from your floor, and walk both routes before you ever need them.**

- **Go to your building's designated meeting point**, account for everyone in your household, and stay there so firefighters are not searching for people who are already out.
- **If you cannot leave safely:** close yourself in a room with a window, seal the door gaps with towels or bedding, call 911 and report your exact unit number and location, and signal from the window.
- **If your building's plan directs residents to shelter in place, follow the posted instructions from your property manager.** Ask which plan applies to your building today. Do not wait until an alarm to find out.

Fire Extinguishers: When to Use One and When Not To

- **Learn the location of the nearest extinguisher in your corridor or common area now, before an emergency.** Most are in cabinets near stairwells, elevator lobbies, and laundry rooms.
- **Use one only if all of these are true:** the fire is small and contained, everyone else is already evacuating, the alarm has been sounded and 911 has been called, you have a clear and unobstructed path to the exit behind you, and you know how to operate the extinguisher.
- **Remember P.A.S.S.:** Pull the pin. Aim at the base of the flames. Squeeze the handle. Sweep side to side.
- **Do not fight the fire if:** it is larger than a small trash can, it is growing or spreading, the room is filling with smoke, you would have to move toward the fire to escape, or you are unsure. Close the door and get out.
- **Give yourself one attempt.** If the extinguisher empties and the fire is still burning, leave immediately.
- **Report any used, damaged, missing, or discharged extinguisher to management the same day.**

Go-Bag: Ready Before the Alarm

Keep a small bag near your primary exit so you are not making decisions in the dark with an alarm sounding. Nothing in your unit is worth your life. Take the bag if it is on your way out, and leave it if it is not.

Keep in the bag

- Copies of identification, insurance policy, lease or deed, and a list of emergency contacts.
- A spare set of keys, a charged power bank and charging cable, and a small amount of cash.
- A flashlight and a whistle.
- A three-day supply of essential medications, or a current written prescription list.
- Spare eyeglasses, hearing aid batteries, and any critical medical supplies.
- Sturdy shoes and a jacket. Many residents evacuate barefoot at 2 a.m.
- Pet leash, carrier, and a photo of each pet with you.
- Comfort items for children, and a small first aid kit.

Grab only if they are within reach on your way out

- Phone, wallet, keys, glasses, medications, and your pets.
- **Do not go back inside for anything.** Do not stop to pack, change clothes, or look for belongings. Do not re-enter to search for a pet. Tell firefighters where the pet is likely to be.
- **Store irreplaceable documents and photos digitally or in a fire-rated box so you never have to choose.**

Everyday Habits That Prevent Fires

- **Plug heat-producing appliances such as space heaters, air fryers, and kettles directly into a wall outlet.** Never into an extension cord or power strip.
- **Keep space heaters at least three feet from bedding, curtains, and furniture,** and turn them off when you leave the room or go to sleep.

- **Charge lithium-ion batteries safely.** Charge e-bikes, scooters, and hoverboards away from your exit door and never overnight while you sleep. Use only the manufacturer's charger, and stop using any battery that is swollen, damaged, hot, or leaking.
- **Clean your dryer lint trap after every load and keep the vent clear.**
- **Replace frayed cords, and never run cords under rugs or across doorways.**
- **Do not overload outlets or daisy-chain power strips.**
- **Keep balconies and patios clear of accumulated combustible storage, cardboard, and dried plant material.**
- **Oily rags can ignite on their own.** Rags soaked with wood stain, linseed or tung oil, varnish, or oil-based paint generate heat as they dry and can burst into flame hours later. Never leave them wadded up, piled, or in a trash bag, bin, closet, or on a balcony, and never put them in a dryer. Lay them flat outdoors on a non-combustible surface, away from the building, until completely dry and stiff, or seal them in a metal container filled with water. Then dispose of them as your waste hauler or local hazardous waste program directs.
- **Know your unit number and building address by heart, and be ready to give it to the 911 dispatcher.**

A building is only as safe as the habits of the people who live in it. Every household that follows these steps protects the neighbors down the hall as well as its own family. Thank you for the care you take, and for looking out for one another.

In any fire, smoke, or carbon monoxide emergency, call 911.

Questions and evacuation plan reviews: San Mateo Consolidated Fire Department, Fire Prevention & Life Safety · 650-522-7940 · prevention@smcfire.ca.gov · www.smcfire.ca.gov