

Fire Safety in an Oxford House

These tips have been compiled from several resources and edited to specifically address issues common to Oxford Houses. For more fire safety information, contact your local fire department.

Recently yet another Oxford House was damaged by fire. Fortunately this time no one was injured. We can't ever afford to relax our vigilance toward fire safety in our houses.

Some of the most common causes of structure fires are electricity, heating, and smoking. Oxford Houses are especially vulnerable to fires caused by these sources. We usually have a larger number of people living in a residence than the building was designed for and a higher percentage of smokers than in the general population.

In addition to televisions and electronics in common areas, many bedrooms will have personal computers, etc., creating a heavy electrical load. Space heaters in rooms are especially problematic. More people also means more cooking and extra dryer use, two more common causes of house fires. And then there's the smoking issue! 😊

Here are some ideas that may help to prevent a fire from beginning in your house:

Electrical

- Discourage the use of space heaters in bedrooms. They're a fire danger no matter how carefully used, and will also cause your electricity bill to skyrocket. Try to compromise on a temperature for your house that most members are comfortable with. If you use space heaters,
 - Never plug them into extension cords; plug them directly into the wall.
 - Never leave them on unattended, and discourage the use of leaving them on while sleeping.
 - Make sure any flammable material such as curtains or bedding is at least three feet away from the heater.
- Avoid using household extension cords. If there aren't enough outlets, invest in heavy-duty surge protectors both in common areas and bedrooms.
- If circuit breakers start tripping or fuses blowing, your electrical system is overloaded. Reduce the number of appliances on the circuit and contact your landlord or a licensed electrician.
- Never allow anyone other than a licensed electrician to work on wiring. Do-it-yourself projects are great for most things, but electricity should be left to the pros!

Cooking

- Careless cooking is the number one cause of residential fires. Never leave items on the stovetop unattended. Turn ovens and burners off immediately when finished using them.
- Wipe up spattered grease as soon as the burner or oven is cool enough. If many of your members fry food, consider investing in a deep fryer to avoid grease spatter on the stove.

- Thorough cleaning of your oven, stove burners, and stove exhaust hood should be part of your house's weekly kitchen chore.
- Don't store anything on top of the stove.
- If a grease fire occurs, don't try to put it out with water. If the burning grease is in a pan, put a lid on it. If it's in the oven, close the oven door and turn it off. It may burn itself out. If not, use a fire extinguisher or call 911.

Smoking

If you smoke indoors:

- Use large ashtrays designed that a cigarette left burning will fall inside the ashtray.
- No smoking allowed in bedrooms, have only smoking in common areas if at all.

In outside smoking areas

- Use butt cans with sand to completely extinguish cigarettes.
- Keep ashtrays and butt cans on non-flammable surfaces like concrete. The heat from a smoldering butt can and may set a porch or other wood surface afire.
- Keep anything flammable well away from areas where people congregate to smoke.
- Don't empty ashtrays directly into the trash.
- Never leave burning cigarettes unattended, even for a moment. Make sure butts are completely extinguished before walking away.

Other dangers

Clothes dryers can be a fire hazard. Avoid putting rubber and some synthetic fabrics in the dryer. Keep the lint trap clean.

Gasoline for lawn mowers should be stored in approved containers and if possible, stored in outside sheds. Gas up your mower at least two feet away from the building.

Children and grandchildren who visit should be considered in fire safety plans. Don't leave kids unattended with lighters, etc., or space heaters. Include them in your fire escape plans.

Are you prepared?

Despite your best efforts to prevent one, a fire may still break out in your house. Planning and preparation are the keys to minimizing damage and preventing loss of life or injury. Your house should contain:

- A smoke detector on each level of the home. Test your smoke detectors periodically, at least every six months. Change the batteries annually.
- A fire extinguisher in or near the kitchen. Purchase an ABC-type fire extinguisher capable of putting out all kinds of fires. Another fire extinguisher in or near the garage or other work area is recommended.

- If you have members sleeping on upper stories of the house with no exit other than the stairs, you must have fire escape ladders. Home improvement and hardware stores carry them. Your local fire department can give you more information on the type best suited to your particular structure.

Every house should have a fire escape plan, preferably with at least two ways out of every room in the house. Basements can be especially problematic. Current code requires that all basement windows be large enough that they can be used to escape a fire. However, many Oxford Houses are older houses with basement windows not up to current codes.

This is something to consider when deciding whether a particular structure is suitable as an Oxford House. It may not be necessary for all windows to be up to code, but it's essential that there be some way out of a basement other than one set of stairs. Stairwells act as chimneys during a fire and can become impassable within a few minutes. If the fire exit is a garage or basement window, make sure it can be opened quickly and easily from the inside. Keep the area free from obstructions so it can be reached in a hurry.

Familiarize new members with your fire escape plan. Include children and any other regular overnight guests. Some houses hold fire drills. If you don't, at least make sure every member knows how to get out of their room and at least two ways off their floor. Arrange a place outside to meet so that a head count can be conducted. Firefighters will need to know if anyone may be trapped inside the building.

In an Oxford House, the house officer usually responsible for most aspects of safety and disaster preparedness is the chore coordinator. He or she will be the one most likely to notice situations that may be fire hazards like lint in a dryer or spattered grease on a stove. During checks to see that chores have been done, keep an eye out for other potential fire hazards as well.

The chore coordinator should also be the member responsible for creating the escape plan and familiarizing new members with it. He or she should be responsible for testing the fire extinguishers and smoke alarms. Either the chore coordinator or someone else specifically delegated needs to be responsible for calling the fire department from a safe location in the event of a fire.

If a fire occurs, only try to put it out with an extinguisher if you're absolutely sure you can do so safely. If you see or smell smoke or flames, or if a smoke detector goes off, get out of the house immediately and call the fire department. Once out, don't re-enter the building until you know it's safe. Fire spreads quickly and can engulf a house within minutes. *Possessions can be replaced, but people can't!*