

What You Need to Know About New Smoke Alarms

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I'm sure the words "New Smoke Alarm Standard Now in Effect!" doesn't usually get you excited enough to jump out of your well-appointed easy chair but this time it should.

For years, the fire service has known that there is a false alarm issue with smoke alarms. To combat this, fire departments have tried a number of tactics from only sending a limited response to advising people to use a specific smoke alarm technology. We did what we normally do; the best we could with the information and resources we were given.

Finally, a scientist said, “what if smoke is different now than it used to be?” At a molecular level. The answer was yes, so, the smart people went to work to find out how to make a new standard for smoke alarms. (It was far more complicated than this but you get the idea.)

The new UL 217 smoke alarm standard is now in effect. Essentially a smoke alarm must alarm when there is a fire but it cannot alarm for nuisance smoke. It must alarm for flaming or smoldering polyurethane foam but not for a smoking burger on the stove. I’m getting hungry just thinking about the smell in the lab during testing!

It will take years for all of the old technology to cycle out of homes. However, if you keep visiting the same properties over and over you can suggest buying a new alarm which meets the new test standard.

Have you heard of the 3 Es? Engineering, Education, and Enforcement. You have learned about the engineering now here comes the education and enforcement.

Did you know?

- Three in five fire deaths happen in homes with no working smoke alarm. With nuisance alarms, people are more likely to permanently disable their alarms. No need to now.
- Smoke alarms to the old standard do not need to be replaced unless defective or greater than 10 years old.
- Tell people to look for the words “Helps reduce cooking nuisance alarms” beneath the UL label when purchasing a new smoke alarm.
- The standard is available now and manufacturers are actively getting their products tested but the drop-dead date for compliance was May 29, 2020.

I love when the 3 Es come together so beautifully. This new technology (engineering) which will be required in the very near future (enforcement) will inform better decision making both for response and in homes (education).

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