

FIRE DRILLS

What are the requirements for fire drills?

The National Fire Code – 2023 Alberta Edition (NFC(AE)) states that a fire safety plan is required for:

- every building containing a care, home-type care, treatment, or detention occupancy,
- every building containing a school, college or university, or a daycare facility,
- every building containing a licensed beverage establishment or a licensed restaurant,
- every building containing an assembly occupancy other than a school, college, university, daycare facility, licensed beverage establishment or a licensed restaurant with an occupant load of more than 30,
- every building where treatment is provided in business and personal services occupancies,
- every building required by the National Building Code – 2023 Alberta Edition (NBC(AE)) to have a fire alarm system,
- demolition and construction sites,
- indoor storage areas, outdoor storage areas and outdoor storage of tires,
- areas where flammable liquids or combustible liquids are stored or handled and,
- areas where hazardous processes or operations occur.

Fire drills are one of the measures in a fire safety plan. Aside from the mandatory requirement listed in the NFC(AE), there are practical reasons why fire drills are important:

- In daycares and schools, it familiarizes children/students with the sound of fire alarms and the formalized procedures for evacuating the building. The intent of these procedures is that the familiarization and practice scenarios will prepare children/students to exit the building in a controlled manner if an emergency occurs.
- In other buildings, it provides an opportunity for staff to practice and evaluate evacuation procedures. Regular practice familiarizes staff with fire drill procedures and increases the chances that they will stay calm and be able to assist with the evacuation of the building during an emergency.
- Fire drills also provide building operators, fire wardens, fire safety code officers (SCO) (if present) to check existing life safety systems and related equipment to ensure they work as intended (e.g. audibility of fire alarms and magnetic lock release).

It is important to note that, for the most part, fire drills are only mandatory for the staff who have designated responsibility (supervisory staff) for the safety of other occupants under the fire safety plan. However, a fire safety plan is of little value if it is not reviewed periodically so that all supervisory staff remain familiar with their responsibilities. A fire drill, then, is at least a review of the fire safety plan by supervisory staff.

Total evacuation fire drills are only mandatory in schools attended by children. The extent to which non-supervisory staff participate in a fire drill should be worked out in cooperation with the fire department. The decision as to whether all occupants should leave the building during a fire drill should be based on the nature of the occupancy.

There are organizations that conduct fire drills as part of their safety culture. While they are not required to conduct evacuation fire drills under the NFC(AE), it is recommended that staff comply with their applicable company's policies and procedures for emergency evacuations/fire drills.

SAFETY TIPS

FIRE DRILLS

It may be necessary to hold additional fire drills outside normal working hours for the benefit of employees on afternoon (evening) or night shifts, who should be as familiar with fire drill procedures as those who work during the day. If full-scale fire drills are not possible during non-regular working hours, arrangements should be made so that night-shift supervisory staff can participate in fire drills conducted during the daytime.

Are there specific procedures for conducting fire drills?

The procedure for conducting fire drills is determined by the person(s) responsible for the building. The following should be taken into consideration:

- the building occupancy and its fire hazards,
- the safety features provided in the building,
- the desirable degree of occupant participation other than supervisory staff,
- the number of participating staff and their degree of experience,
- the features of fire emergency systems installed in high buildings and,
- the requirements of the fire department.

Some occupants of a building may require special assistance during evacuation because cognitive or physical limitations make them unable to independently proceed to a place of safety. Fire safety for these occupants will depend on preplanning and the occupants' awareness of the fire protection measures incorporated into the building. In some buildings, it may be appropriate to advise such occupants of these provisions by posted notices, handouts or other suitable means. In certain residential occupancies, such as hotels or motels, staff should be aware of rooms occupied by those requiring special assistance during evacuation and should inform the responding fire department.

How often do I need to have a fire drill?

Fire drills should be held at intervals not greater than 12 months for supervisory staff. The following are exceptions:

- in day-care centres, care, home-type care, treatment or detention facilities, fire drills should be held at intervals not greater than one month,
- in schools attended by children, total evacuation fire drills should be held at least 3 times in each of the fall and spring school terms,
- in high buildings, fire drills should be held at least every 2 months, and
- in laboratories, fire drills should be held at intervals not greater than 3 months.

It is an NFC(AE) requirement to keep a record of fire drills containing the date of the drill, the evacuation time and any comments or recommendations. The record of the drills should be kept on the premises for five years from the time of the fire drill.

Contact

Please contact the local fire department for any questions regarding this Safety Tip.