

Smoke alarms

You'll find this factsheet useful if you have hearing loss and want to find out about smoke alarms that will alert you with flashing lights or a vibrating pad. When we say 'people with hearing loss', we mean all levels of hearing loss, including people who are profoundly deaf.

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If you would like this factsheet in Braille, large print, or audio, please contact our Information Line - see last page for contact details.



Emergency SMS

If you cannot make voice calls, you can contact the 999 emergency services by SMS text from your mobile phone using the EmergencySMS service that has been designed specifically for people with hearing loss or speech difficulties. For more information, go to [emergencysms.org.uk](https://www.emergencysms.org.uk) or contact our Information Line.

Why do I need a home fire-safety check?

A free home-fire risk assessment, or a home-fire safety check, is available for every home in the UK from your local fire and rescue service (see below). The check will identify any fire risks within your home and highlight how to reduce those risks. Tell the safety team about your hearing loss, and whether you use a hearing aid or cochlear implant, so that they can recommend the most suitable smoke alarm to meet your needs.

To book a home fire safety check, contact your local fire and rescue service. If you go to [cfoa.org.uk/frs](https://www.cfoa.org.uk/frs) and search with your postcode, you'll find the fire and rescue service nearest to you.

If you are deaf or have severe hearing loss, ask the fire and rescue service if they can provide you with a suitable smoke alarm free of charge, or ask your local authority social services team.

What's special about smoke alarms for people with hearing loss?

People with hearing loss may not be woken by typical smoke alarms. Plus, if you use hearing aids, you'll be less likely to hear your smoke alarm when you take them out to sleep.

Smoke alarms for people with hearing loss usually include a vibrating pad that goes under the pillow to wake you, and a bright flashing 'strobe' light to alert you when you are awake. A vibrating pager – a small device you can stick in a pocket or clip on, that vibrates when the smoke alarm goes off – and a low-pitched, powerful alarm, can also be useful if you think you may not hear the alarm or see the flashing lights.

How do I install my smoke alarm?

If you install a smoke alarm yourself, make sure you follow the manufacturer's instructions on the best place to fit it, how many you should have on each floor – and the type of smoke alarm that is best for you. If you use an installer, they should fit

the smoke alarm/s to BS 5839 part 6: 2013 – a code of practice standard for the installation of smoke alarms in domestic dwellings.

What are the different types of smoke alarm?

There are three types of smoke alarm that detect smoke and heat in different ways:

- **Ionisation detectors** are sensitive to fast-burning, open fires, such as chip-pan fires.
- **Optical detectors** are more effective at detecting slow-burning fires, such as those caused by overheated electrical wiring.
- **Heat detectors** detect a rapid temperature rise. They are mainly intended for the kitchen.

What is a smoke alarm ‘system’?

A smoke alarm system is made up of different parts, which typically include the following:

- One or more smoke alarms that detect smoke and heat in different ways.
- A control unit or receiver with a bright flashing light and an under-pillow vibrating pad.
- A vibrating pager or other type of alerting device, such as a special low-frequency/pitch alarm.

The different parts of the system are wirelessly linked together and either mains

or battery-powered. If mains-powered they may have battery back-up in case of a power failure. Other ‘fail-safe’ features may include a visual notification, such as a flashing indicator, if the wireless link between a smoke alarm and a receiver fails, or if the battery is low.

Some smoke alarm systems are part of a multi-alerting system that notifies you of the doorbell, telephone and other alerts. Some also include carbon monoxide detection (see below).

Always follow the manufacturer’s instructions if you fit the smoke alarm system yourself. If you use an installer, they should fit it to BS 5839 part 6: 2013.

Do I need a carbon monoxide alarm?

A faulty gas appliance, such as a boiler or gas fire, can lead to carbon monoxide poisoning – which can be fatal.

Open coal fires, wood burners and multi-fuel systems can also be a source of carbon monoxide poisoning if there’s no adequate ventilation. A carbon monoxide alarm will give an early, loud warning if there is a problem. Some smoke alarms for people who are deaf or hard of hearing do include a carbon monoxide alarm – with an additional vibrating and/or visual alert.

Maintaining and servicing appliances

Make sure your boiler, cooker, heating system and various appliances are installed and regularly serviced by a

reputable, registered engineer. Don't attempt to install or service them yourself!

Anyone carrying out work on installations and appliances in your home must be registered with a relevant association, such as the:

- Gas Safe Register (for gas appliances)
- Heating Equipment Testing and Approval Scheme (HETAS) (for solid-fuel appliances)
- Oil Firing Technical Association (OFTEC) (for oil appliances)

Maintaining chimneys and flues

Make sure all chimneys and flues are swept regularly by a qualified sweep who's a member of one of the following:

- National Association of Chimney Sweeps (NACS)
- Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps
- Association of Professional Independent Chimney Sweeps (APICS)

If you'd like more guidance on carbon monoxide poisoning, including how to prevent it, and how to maintain and service your appliances, go to:

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Carbon-monoxide-poisoning

Where should I put the smoke alarm control unit or receiver?

The control unit or receiver should be fixed to a wall close to your bed, or placed on a flat surface, such as a bedside table. This is so you can put the vibrating pad under your pillow or mattress easily, and see the flashing light, which is designed to alert you when you are awake.

Some smoke alarm systems can be used with an alarm clock, so you only have one vibrating pad. The vibration pattern for the smoke alarm should be clearly distinguishable from the alarm clock. You need to know whether you've been woken because it's time to get up, or because there's a fire in your home!

How do I find the alert that's right for me?

As vibration is the most reliable way to wake someone with hearing loss, the safest option is to put a vibrating pad under your pillow, ideally inside the pillowcase. You can put it under the mattress if the vibration is powerful enough to wake you.

Other types of alert:

- A bright flashing 'strobe' light designed to attract your attention when you are awake – the light is not designed to wake you.

- A vibrating pager to alert you, also when you are awake. On its own, a pager is not powerful enough to wake you.
- A low-pitch (low-frequency) alarm that provides an additional, audible alert. Depending on your type of hearing loss, you may find the lower pitch easier to hear, but it should be used in combination with other alerting devices, such as a flashing light and vibrating pad.

If your smoke alarm system has only one strobe light and it's in the bedroom, you may not know it's flashing when you are in another part of the house. If this is the case, you may need to consider having additional strobe lights in other areas and/or wearing a vibrating pager or a low-frequency/pitch sounding alarm.

I already have a smoke alarm. Do I need another one?

UK regulations require that all new-build houses and flats (including conversions) are fitted with interconnected smoke alarms – on each floor. This is so that, if one alarm goes off, it sets off all the others within the house or flat. However, these systems may not be installed with vibrating pads and flashing lights.

If this is the case, contact your local fire and rescue service. They may suggest changes or modifications to the system (which could mean additional parts or replacement) to suit your level of hearing loss). Interconnected smoke alarm systems are mains powered; for safety reasons, therefore, any modifications or replacement should be carried out by a fully qualified installer to BS5839 part 6: 2013.

How can I make sure my smoke alarm is working?

For maximum protection, you should test your smoke alarm regularly, in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. You should also test it if you have been away from home for any period of time.

The manufacturer's instructions will tell you when the smoke alarm should be replaced – this is usually after 10 years – and how to keep it clean. Keep the instructions that come with your smoke alarm for easy reference.

BS5446 part 3: 2015 home smoke alarms standard for people who are deaf and hard of hearing

This important standard, developed by the British Standards Institute, applies to manufacturers of smoke alarm and carbon monoxide systems for people who are deaf or have a hearing loss. At the time of publication, no smoke alarm systems fully meet the standard, but many do give adequate protection.

The most important features to look for are:

- A vibrating pad that can be placed under a pillow (or mattress if it's powerful enough) so that you are alerted when you're asleep. It should be difficult to unplug or disconnect and a warning light should come on if you accidentally do so.
- A bright flashing light to alert you when you're awake.
- The system should have battery back-up, so that if there is a power failure, or if the system is unplugged from the mains, it will keep working for at least 72 hours.
- Enough range, if you have a wireless smoke alarm system, to cover all parts of your home.
- An easy-to-use test button, so that the system can be easily tested regularly.

If you want to find out more about service providers' obligations to provide equipment under the Equality Act, see our factsheet *The Equality Act 2010 - a guide for service users*.

Where can I buy products that may help?

We sell a range of equipment for people with hearing loss and tinnitus. Visit our online shop, or request a copy of our catalogue. Contact us at:

1 Haddonbrook Business Centre, Orton Southgate, Peterborough PE2 6YX

Telephone: **01733 361199**

Textphone: **01733 238020**

Fax: **01733 361161**

Email: solutions@hearingloss.org.uk

Website: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop

Where can I get further information?

Fire services

For more information or advice on fire safety, contact your local fire and rescue service. Look in your local phone book or go to cfoa.org.uk/frs

Action on Hearing Loss

Free support and information

We produce a wide range of free information covering deafness, tinnitus, hearing loss and related issues. Our leaflets are a good place to start, as they cover the basics, while our factsheets (like this one), go into more detail.

Our leaflet *Products to help with hearing loss and tinnitus* provides a concise introduction to equipment to help you.

We also have other Products and technology factsheets, explaining what equipment and technology can help.

You can find out more and order these, and our other leaflets and factsheets, from our Information Line (see back page for contact details) or download them from our website at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets

Can you help us improve our information?

We'd love to hear what you think of this factsheet – please email reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk And do let us know if you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create new publications and improve existing ones.

Information you can trust

We are certified by The Information Standard as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information. For a list of references for this factsheet, please email references@hearingloss.org.uk

Please help us support others

We provide our leaflets, factsheets and Information Line service free of charge to anyone affected by deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss in the UK, but we rely on the generosity of our supporters to help us do this. We would be very grateful if you would consider making a donation – of as little or as much as you can afford.

 Send a cheque, payable to **Action on Hearing Loss, to Freepost RTLX-CZKX-BTTZ, Action on Hearing Loss, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL**
(no stamp needed!)

 actiononhearingloss.org.uk/icanhelp

 **020 7296 8264**

 **020 7296 8246**

Our purpose is to help people confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss to live the life they choose. We enable them to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss Information Line

Telephone: **0808 808 0123**

Textphone: **0808 808 9000**

SMS: **0780 000 0360**

(standard text message rates apply)

Email: **information@hearingloss.org.uk**

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