



Smoke Detector FAQs

Where are smoke detectors required?

At a minimum, one smoke detector is required on each level of a unit. This means there must be at least one smoke detector on each floor of the unit, including but not limited to the basement, first floor, second floor, third floor, attic, etc. The smoke detector must be on the level it is protecting. For example, it cannot be located at the top of the basement stairwell to protect the basement. It must be located at the basement level.

Why did NCHC tell me I need more than one smoke detector on a level?

There are only two times when an additional smoke detector is required on the same level:

- ❖ One scenario is when there is a bedroom located at the front of the unit and another in the far rear of the unit. If a smoke detector is installed near the front bedroom, the rear bedroom is too far away to be protected. In such case, NCHC will require a smoke detector installed either in or near both bedroom areas.
- ❖ The other condition applies when there is a common area hallway in the unit (for over/under duplexes, there is a rear or front common stairwell). In this case, there not only needs to be appropriately located smoke detectors inside the unit but also outside the unit on each level of the common hallway or stairwell.

Why do I need a smoke detector in my attic if it is not finished?

Even if the attic is unfinished but the resident has access to it (by a fixed set of stairs, with a handrail if there is more than four steps) for storage, a closet, playroom, TV room, etc., regardless of what the use may be, it must have a smoke detector. It is no different than requiring a smoke detector for an unfinished basement that is available to the resident and not an inaccessible crawlspace.

What do you mean is you state that the smoke detector is improperly located?

HQS requires smoke detector installation comply with the current version of NFPA codes. Installation requirements are usually included when purchasing a new smoke detector. The proper location of a smoke detector is as follows:

- ❖ The smoke detector may be installed on either a wall or ceiling.
- ❖ If mounted on a wall, the smoke detector must be located from the corner of a wall and ceiling no less than 4 inches and no further than 12 inches.
- ❖ If mounted on a ceiling, it must be located no less than 4 inches from the corner of a wall and ceiling.
- ❖ If unfinished areas, such as an attic or basement, the smoke detector cannot be installed on the side of a floor joist or roof truss. The smoke detector must be installed flat on the bottom edge of the floor joist or roof truss. NFPA has determined through tests that smoke will curl and stay below the joist/truss instead of going between the joists/trusses.

Whose responsibility is it to repair an inoperable or missing smoke detector?

For the unit to pass the initial HQS inspection, all smoke detectors must be working and installed properly. This inspection is done when the unit is still vacant. Since then, the only thing that might have changed is when the resident has moved in and time may cause the battery or smoke detector to wear out. During an annual HQS inspection, if the smoke detector has failed because the whole unit or battery is missing, then the NCHC would identify it as a tenant responsibility to repair or replace. If there never was a smoke detector installed where one is required, or the smoke detector has a battery installed and seems to be in working condition but does not sound when tested, it will be identified as a landlord responsibility to remedy.

How to Keep Smoke Detectors Working

It takes a constant effort to keep smoke detectors in place and operating. Below are simple suggestions:

- ❖ Locate the smoke detectors as far away from the kitchen and bathroom areas as possible. Steam from cooking and bathing will set off a smoke detector. False alarms are the most common reason a resident will disconnect a smoke detector.
- ❖ When the smoke detector “chirps” every minute or so, that means the battery needs to be replaced. This will drive a person crazy and is the second most common reason a resident will disconnect a smoke detector.
- ❖ Replace smoke detector batteries frequently and at least every spring and fall when clocks are changed. When replacing furnace filters, cleaning gutters and doing other preventative home maintenance, add the task of changing smoke detector batteries to the routine.
- ❖ Anytime you or one of your staff performs any visit to the unit, make sure the person checks to make sure the smoke detector is working. If the smoke detector is not working, repair it.
- ❖ Have the lease require that the resident call if the smoke detector is not working properly. Inform the resident if an inspection reveals that a smoke detector has been tampered with or is missing, the resident may be fined for the repair and replacement costs.
- ❖ Install a smoke detector with a 10-year lithium battery. It is a bit more expensive but worth it.
- ❖ Smoke detector models are available in a carbon monoxide/smoke detector combination unit.
- ❖ Install a hard-wired smoke detector that only needs a battery for power outage backup. While the wiring is somewhat expensive to install initially, most smoke detectors come with a clip to install the 110-volt line. Check with an electrician for more information.
- ❖ Avoid the low cost or expensive smoke detectors. The cheap smoke detectors are just that. They will not last long and break easily. The expensive smoke detectors cost more and are generally considered less reliable, less durable and have more false alarms than mid-cost brands.
- ❖ Replace smoke detectors at least every five years. With technological advances, significant improvements have been made to the design and function of smoke detectors. Newer designs are much less apt to malfunction or give false alarms. In addition, smoke detector performance deteriorates over time due to nicotine, insects, paint and other environmental conditions. Some sensors get plugged over time and will not work when they are needed during a fire.

Do the right thing and be diligent in making sure these important issues are addressed.