

Improving Your Security and Safety

Most apartment and condominium buildings are secure and safe. However, you should be aware of, and periodically review, the security and safety of your apartment and apartment building.

In rental buildings, the building owner and management are responsible for security. In condominiums, suite security is typically an owner concern and the condominium corporation is responsible for common areas—including exterior doors and windows and corridor doors to individual apartments. Your best defence is to know about and use the security and safety features in your building and surrounding spaces. Be alert and prevent dangerous situations before they occur.

This *About Your Apartment* highlights the types of security and safety features you may have in your building and how to use them effectively. It deals with personal security; discouraging theft and trespassing; preventing falls from windows and balconies and combustion safety.

Whether you own or rent your apartment, you can make it more safe and secure for you and your family. If, after reading this *About Your Apartment*, you realize that your apartment or building has security or safety issues, discuss them with your building management or condominium corporation. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

SECURITY: HOW SECURE IS YOUR APARTMENT?

Various methods are used to keep apartments and apartment buildings secure from trespassing, theft and vandalism. Security devices, such as deadbolt locks on doors, window locks, controlled-access entrances and well-lit common spaces all contribute to a secure building. Familiarize yourself with your building and apartment's security measures. The following sections discuss typical apartment building security features.

Apartment-corridor doors

Your apartment door should have a good deadbolt lock. One feature to look for is lock throw—the length the locking bolt protrudes from the door into the surrounding door frame when placed in the full lock position. Test this by locking the door while it is open—a good deadbolt lock protrudes 35 mm (1 ½ in.) or more when fully extended. A strong deadbolt lock also has a jimmy-proof strike plate (the part of the lock assembly mounted in the door frame to receive the bolt). The strike plate should be secured to the door framing by screws at least 50–75 mm (2–3 in.) long. This ensures the strike plate is fastened to the structure of the wall and not just the door frame.

Locks only work if you use them. Remember to lock your apartment even when you step out for a moment to check the mail. In fact, it is a good safety habit to keep the door locked at all times—even while you are in the apartment. Chain-type locks, which are easy to break, offer very little resistance to forced entry.

Install a door viewer (peephole) in your entrance door, if you do not already have one. If you have children, consider installing a peephole at their level.

Balcony doors

Intrusion is not just a ground floor or corridor door threat. Always lock balcony doors when you are away from home. Equip balcony doors with the same type of deadbolt locks recommended for corridor doors. There is special hardware to secure sliding balcony doors but a simple, effective, inexpensive solution is a sturdy piece of wood in the door's track to prevent the sliding door from opening. Make sure the sliding part of the door can't be lifted from its track.

Items on the balcony are also vulnerable to theft. If thieves see valuables on a balcony—such as bicycles—they will climb a ladder to steal them. Conceal and secure items you cannot store inside. Lock bicycles.

Windows

Make sure all windows close fully, that the locking hardware is in good condition and that it is easy to lock the window when you shut it. Ensure that a thief cannot lift a horizontal window out of its track. Even on upper floors, a thief can get into your apartment through an open window overlooking a balcony.

Storage room

If you have a separate locker or storage room, store items out of reach and up off the floor. Cover them. Often, locker walls are chain-link fencing or wood slats. This means anyone can see what is in your locker and that your belongings are exposed to spills or floods. Also, ensure that door hinges and screws of the locking system are covered when the access door is locked. This will prevent a thief from getting into the locker by unscrewing the hasp or hinges.

Building entry system

The front door entry system of most apartment buildings allows a resident to remotely let guests into the building. These systems are only effective if the front door locking system functions and intruders cannot take advantage of an open door to enter the building.

When you activate the front door entry system, make sure you know who is asking to come in and remind them to close the door behind them. If you have young children or children visit often, ensure they know how to correctly operate the remote entry system. Would-be intruders will sometimes buzz different apartments until someone lets them in. Always be sure that you know the person before you let them into the apartment building. If you are unsure, notify the building management of the entry request so they can handle it.

Elevator security

- Look and see who is in the elevator before entering. If you feel uncomfortable, **do not enter the elevator**, wait for the next one.
- Stand beside the control panel in the elevator and know how to use the emergency alarm button.
- If a suspicious person enters the elevator, leave before the door closes.

Parking garage security

- If possible, use the parking garage during periods of high use when others are around.
- Watch for suspicious persons as you enter the parking garage. Drive back out if you are concerned.
- Park near exit doors or the elevator foyer, if possible.
- Park in well-lit areas.
- Walk in the centre of the garage.
- Ask building management to install security cameras and alarm stations if the garage has a history of theft or security problems.

Building security

Tell your building management if you have problems with closing or locking windows and doors. Report burned-out and broken lights in common areas, such as corridors, stairwells, garbage rooms, laundry areas, parking garages and outdoor areas. If your building is equipped with security cameras or alarm stations, make sure you know where they are and how to use them in emergencies. Report any suspicious or unfamiliar people loitering inside or outside the building to the building management.

Neighbourhood security

The safety of your neighbourhood has an effect on your building's security. To find out if your building and neighbourhood are safe, contact your local police department at its non-emergency number. Many police departments have websites with information about criminal incidents. Police departments will review your building's security. Get involved with a neighbourhood watch-type program or start one yourself—it is good protection and helps build a sense of community. Sometimes, if conditions warrant, it may be necessary to hire a security company.

Security responsibility

The landlord or the condominium corporation (often through a property manager) is usually responsible for building security. Typically this involves:

- ensuring that security systems meet or exceed security requirements for apartment buildings, such as deadbolt locks on doors, good lighting and window locks;
- ensuring that security systems provide reasonable protection for all residents—in their apartments and in common areas, such as parking garages and elevators;
- conducting regular inspections to spot and fix security problems, such as broken locks or burned-out exterior lights, and asking residents to submit security concerns or suggestions as part of continuing maintenance;
- dealing with complaints about dangerous situations, suspicious activities or broken security items.

PERSONAL SECURITY

Personal security is largely a matter of continuing awareness of your surroundings, and reducing risks. As you approach your building, if something does not “feel” right, do not enter; go to another entrance or exit or get help from the building management or the police. If possible, schedule your arrivals and departures with other residents. Park your car in well-lit areas as close as possible to building entrances.

Do not leave messages on your phone saying you are away or on vacation. Tell a trustworthy neighbour when you plan to be away and ask the neighbour to pick up mail and flyers. Cancel newspaper subscriptions and consider using lights (energy efficient compact fluorescents are best as they consume the least electricity) and a radio on timers to make it look, and sound, as if someone is at home. Do not put a note on your door saying you are away. Cover the window in your mailbox (if there is one) to avoid drawing attention to an accumulation of mail.

Police, insurance companies and private security professionals can advise you or your landlord on ways to make your apartment building more secure.

You can do your part to keep the apartment building secure:

- Report any security concerns or problems to the building manager or landlord.
- Do not disable security features. Safety latches on windows keep intruders out—and children in.
- Do not prop exit doors open. These doors are designed to stay closed for security and fire safety.
- Do not hold the door for a stranger to enter. Be wary of strangers who linger around the front door and dash to hold the door open after it has been unlocked.

- Do not give your apartment keys or pass cards to strangers or tell strangers the access codes to the building.
- Tell building management and security personnel when you are planning to have work done on your apartment. Do not let anyone in to work in your apartment unless you, the landlord or the building manager has previously arranged for the work. Be wary of “security personnel” who knock unannounced.
- If you live near the ground and you like to open your windows, make sure the windows do not open wide enough to let someone through. Use a window safety device (see “Preventing falls from windows and balconies.”) You can also restrict a window opening with a removable nail or by placing a shortened broomstick in the track. Modifying the window itself, however, may void its warranty.
- If you or a family member has a disability, ensure that security features, such as locks on windows and doors, peepholes and security cameras, accommodate your needs.

HOW SAFE IS YOUR APARTMENT?

Safe and secure living is more than just locks and security features. Fire, falls and everyday household items and activities can affect your safety. Be aware and prepared and you can significantly reduce the safety risks in both your apartment and your building.

Preventing falls from windows and balconies

Falls are one of the leading causes of injury and death among children. Children are often tempted to climb up to apartment windows and balcony guardrails to get a better view. In such instances, a fall can happen in a matter of seconds. Never leave children unattended on a balcony or near an open window.

Many municipalities require apartment windows to have mechanical safety devices to prevent them from opening more than 10 cm (4 in.). These safety devices protect children. If you remove or disable them, you can endanger the life of a child who lives with you or visits your apartment. Make sure that your windows have mechanical safety devices and that they work properly. Window screens are not strong enough to prevent falls by even the smallest child.

Preventing falls checklist

- Ensure all windows more than 2 m (6 ft.) above the ground have safety devices.
- Make sure everyone in your apartment (including children) knows that window screens cannot prevent a fall.
- Keep cribs, beds, chairs and any furniture a child can climb away from all windows.
- Lock doors to balconies with a childproof lock.
- Keep chairs and anything else a child can climb away from balcony railings.
- Do not store items children can move and climb on balconies.
- Always supervise a child on a balcony. Never leave a child unattended on a balcony—even for a moment.

Preventing falls elsewhere:

Windows and balconies are not the only fall hazards in an apartment building. Poorly lit stairwells, slippery or uneven entry steps, slippery lobby floors, clutter on apartment floors and wet bathroom floors are also falling hazards, especially for older people. To prevent falls in your apartment:

- Keep your floors free of clutter and clean up spills immediately.
- Don't use throw rugs or scatter rugs on hard surfaces. If you have them, use a slip-resistant underlay.

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- Use night lights in hallways, particularly between the bedroom and bathroom.
- In the bathroom, use non-slip mats in and beside the tub and, if needed, install grab bars and use a bath stool or bench.
- Use a proper stepstool or short ladder to reach upper cabinets, change light bulbs and so on. The stepstool should have a handle and rubber-tipped feet to prevent slipping.
- Store heavy items on lower shelves and often-used items within easy arm's reach to reduce the need to use a stepstool.
- Repair damaged floor surfaces (bent vinyl tile, torn or wrinkled carpet) to prevent tripping.

In the common areas of your apartment building, be aware of:

- floor coverings that become slippery when wet, such as marble floors in lobbies;
 - poorly lit stairwells and entrances. Stairs and entranceways should be well lit from above with a light switch at the top and bottom of the steps or an automatic switch;
 - steep, winding, slippery or non-uniform steps in entrances and stairwells. The steps should have a consistent rise and tread depth with clearly defined edges;
 - missing or loose handrails on stairs. All stairs should have a securely attached handrail in good repair—preferably one on each side of the stairway;
 - tripping hazards, such as cracks in sidewalks, damaged floor tiles or worn spots in hallway carpets;
- ice, snow and debris at entrances and on sidewalks.

If you notice hazards or unsafe conditions in or around your building, tell your building manager or landlord.

Combustion safety

Some apartments have natural-gas furnaces, hot water tanks and fireplaces. Some even have wood-burning appliances. These appliances burn fuel to produce heat. The burning produces dangerous gases that must be vented outdoors—usually through a chimney or a side wall vent that looks like a plastic pipe or metal duct. If the combustion gases are not vented properly, it creates a serious health hazard in your apartment.

To prevent problems from fuel-fired appliances in your unit:

- ensure the appliances and venting systems are serviced annually;
- never place items on or around fuel-fired appliances if the items could disrupt air flow to or around the appliance;
- never block outdoor air ducts that provide combustion air to the appliances;
- operate the exhaust hood over a gas-fired stove range when you cook;
- never fully or partially obstruct chimneys or vents on the outside walls of your apartment;

- report any problems with your appliances to the building management (if you rent) or to a contractor (if you own the condominium and the equipment);
- report buildups of ice, bird nests or other blockages on outside vents.

CARBON MONOXIDE

Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odourless, tasteless, colourless, toxic gas produced by the incomplete combustion of fossil fuels. CO can escape into the living space of your apartment from a damaged or improperly functioning gas-fired furnace, fireplace or any other combustion appliance. If you live above or beside a parking garage, CO may be able to enter your apartment. Install a CO detector in your apartment if you have any combustion appliances in your unit or live above or beside a parking garage. Small amounts of CO may be produced by gas ranges—ensure that you operate the rangehood or open a window when the stove is in use.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SECURITY AND SAFETY TIPS:

Refer to the City of Toronto website for a list of home safety tips for children at: www.city.toronto.on.ca/ems/safety_tips/child_1.htm.

Canada Safety Council: <http://www.safety-council.org/info/home/home.htm>

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