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Better fire safety in hotels saves lives

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

Thick smoke rolled through the New York Hilton near Rockefeller Center on the afternoon of Oct. 1, the result of a garbage fire in the basement.



Hotel guests climb down a ladder during a fire at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas on Nov. 21, 1980. The blaze killed 85.

AP/Las Vegas Sun

Hundreds of guests were evacuated from the 46-story hotel, Manhattan traffic was tied up for hours and 33 people were treated at the hospital for smoke inhalation. But, most important, no one died.

It's an increasingly common outcome of hotel fires these days.



Jeff Christensen, AP
Hundreds of people wait outside the Hilton Hotel in midtown New York last month after a small fire sent smoke throughout the hotel.

A wave of tougher building codes and fire-safety laws enacted in recent decades have left the USA a better place by one important measure: Deaths and injuries from hotel fires are down dramatically. At the same time, hotel fires continue to kill or injure scores in the USA each year, and the threat of catastrophe remains. And travelers outside this country continue to face higher risk, largely because life-saving automatic sprinklers, which have become common here, are more rare.

Twenty-five years ago today — Nov. 21, 1980 — a fire at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas killed 85 and injured 700. It was the worst hotel

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fire the nation had seen since an Atlanta blaze in 1946. It spawned a legacy of tighter fire regulations and broader deployment of water sprinklers in hotel rooms and common areas.

Deadliest U.S. hotel fires since 1900

Hotel, location	Year	Deaths
Winecoff Hotel, Atlanta	1946	119
Dupont Plaza Hotel, San Juan, Puerto Rico	1986	97
MGM Grand, Las Vegas	1980	85
LaSalle Hotel, Chicago	1946	61
Gulf Hotel, Houston	1943	54

Source: National Fire Protection Association

Partly because automatic sprinklers are dousing or limiting the spread of fires before they become killers, the deadliest hotel fire in the USA since 1997 has been in single digits — six deaths. It was in a hotel without sprinklers.

Robert Solomon of the non-profit National Fire Protection Association welcomes the progress but says governments need to continue tightening regulations to further reduce losses. "A lot more has to be done," says Solomon.

Among other things, local governments need to promote greater use of sprinklers by eliminating exemptions for hotels and motels that were built before tougher codes were instituted, he says. Building owners have traditionally resisted retrofitting older buildings with such systems because of the cost.

But safety experts say universal installation of sprinkler systems could save more lives.

Kevin Maher of the trade group American Hotel & Lodging Association says hotels have made "tremendous strides" by installing sprinklers and fire alarms and taking other steps to improve fire safety. He says his group, which represents about 8,400 U.S. hotels, doesn't support installation of sprinklers at every hotel property. Each local government should make its own decision about the matter, he says.

U.S. fires declining annually

"Is this smell-a-vision?" Julie Keigley of San Anselmo, Calif., recalls thinking when she smelled smoke last month as she ascended in an elevator at the New York Hilton while watching a CNN report about a California fire. After the elevator opened to a smoky 33rd floor, she took the elevator down to the lobby and called out: "Fire!"

Keigley was uninjured in what was likely one of several hotel fires that day. Government and fire-safety officials estimate that 4,000 hotel and motel fires — more than 10 every day — are reported each year to U.S. fire departments. Hotel fires are the second-most-common type of residential fire behind households. Cooking, smoking, appliances and arson top the list of causes.

Tips for guests on hotel fire safety

Before checking in, Roy Marshall asks if a high-rise hotel has automatic sprinklers. "If they don't, I don't stay there," says Marshall, former Iowa fire marshal and now director of a public interest group promoting fire safety in homes.

Some advice from experts on fire safety in hotels:

- Book a lower-floor room equipped with sprinklers. Many such hotels are listed at www.usfa.fema.gov/hotel.

The number of yearly fires reported to local authorities has steadily declined, falling by two-thirds since the fire at the 26-story MGM Grand. The landmark Las Vegas fire began when a poorly installed electrical system malfunctioned in a wall of one of the hotel's restaurants. The restaurant and most other areas had no sprinklers.

Fire spread through the casino, sending smoke through the heating and air conditioning system and causing elevators to fall. Only about 5% of the hotel, which is now Bally's, burned. Nearly all who were killed died of smoke and carbon monoxide inhalation.

Safety experts credit the drop in the number of fires to tougher local codes, hotel improvements and federal government legislation after the Las Vegas fire. A 1986 fire that killed 97 on New Year's Eve at the Dupont

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For European hotels with sprinklers, check www.eurosprinkler.org.

- Ask the desk clerk what the fire alarm sounds like. Ask for a room with a flashing alarm if you are deaf.
- Locate exits and stairways. Count the number of doors between them and your room. Locate fire alarms.
- If the door knob is hot, keep the door shut and place damp towels into the cracks around it. Open a window and turn on the bathroom vent if smoke enters the room.
- Escape by stairs, not an elevator. If you must escape through smoke, get low.

Plaza Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico, gave further impetus to move toward tighter fire-safety requirements, Solomon says.

Among the actions that have had an effect:

- A 1981 Nevada law mandated sprinkler systems in hotels and other buildings taller than 55 feet. Three years later, says Clark County Fire Department spokesman Bob Leinbach, another state law required sprinklers in new hotels more than two stories. More than \$200 million was spent to retrofit Las Vegas and other county hotels, he says.
- A 1983 Florida law mandated sprinkler systems in all rooms and public areas of new and existing hotels taller than two stories that have interior hallways. Hotels and motels in the state pushed for the law after Las Vegas saw a decline in tourism after the MGM Grand fire. More than \$60 million was spent to retrofit existing hotels, estimates Buddy Dewar, a former Florida state fire official.
- A 1990 federal law prohibits government employees traveling in the USA on business from staying in any hotel taller than three stories that lacks sprinklers, which has given hotels incentive to upgrade.

Most major U.S. cities' safety codes now require sprinklers in newly built hotels and motels.

Generally, says Dewar, who now works for a trade group, the National Fire Sprinkler Association, hotels and motels have no sprinklers if they are less than three stories tall and are more than 10 years old. Hotels and motels three- to seven-stories tall are often without sprinklers if the room doors open to an open-air walkway, he says.

The NFPA says the last fire with at least five fatalities occurred at a Comfort Inn in Greenville, S.C., in January 2004. Six people were killed and six others critically injured in the blaze at the five-story hotel, which was built in 1988 and wasn't required to have sprinklers.

Before that, seven years had passed without a hotel fire with as many as five fatalities. In 1997, an arsonist set a fire in an area without sprinklers at the Hacienda Plaza Inn in Thornton, Colo., killing five.

USA TODAY analyzed media accounts of fires that broke out in 63 U.S. hotels during the first 10 months of 2005. At least one person died in 15 of the fires. The most fatalities in a single fire were three.

Marriott leader among chains

Solomon and other fire-safety experts point to Marriott International as the industry leader advocating sprinkler systems. The company's fire-safety expert, Sonny Scarf, says all Marriott hotels in the USA, except up to 10% of Residence Inns, have sprinkler systems in rooms and other areas. About 50 hotels abroad that were acquired by Marriott do not have sprinklers but will be retrofitted, he says.

Ritz-Carlton and Hilton say all their hotels worldwide have sprinklers in rooms and other areas. All of Omni's hotels except the Royal Orleans in New Orleans have them, says spokeswoman Christine Connelly. The New Orleans hotel meets the local fire code without sprinklers but is considering putting them in, she says.

Le Méridien's new hotels and some older ones have sprinklers in rooms and other areas, says security director David Purkiss. "Some hotels, particularly the smaller hotels in Africa, are not currently fitted with sprinkler systems."

Several chains say all their hotels meet local fire standards but did not offer specifics about sprinklers. Some say they don't have such information, because many of their hotels are franchises.

Cendant, which has nine hotel brands including Days Inn, Howard Johnson, Ramada, Super 8 and Wyndham Worldwide, says all its hotels are individually owned and operated and that the owners are required to comply with applicable fire-safety laws.

Various budget hotel chains didn't respond to USA TODAY questions about whether their hotels have sprinkler systems. Microtel Inns & Suites equips all its rooms and public areas with them, says U.S. Franchise Systems spokeswoman Barbara Wiener-Fischhof. Of 98 Hawthorn Suites — another U.S. Franchise Systems brand — 88 have sprinklers, she says.

Sprinklers rare in Europe

In September, Margy Klein, 46, of Ellicott City, Md., and Jean Gibbs, 62, of Owings Mills, Md., tried to escape a fire at the Best Western Richmond Hotel & Convention Centre in Richmond, British Columbia. They died of smoke inhalation.

The vacationing women were staying in an older part of the hotel not equipped with sprinklers. A newer part of the hotel had them.

Brad Klein, Margy Klein's brother, says it's wrong to have only some parts of a hotel equipped with sprinklers. He says the hotel had one section with sprinklers and two others without them: "It's like a shell game with a pea under one cup and nothing under two."

If there had been sprinklers, "It's possible we would not have had fatalities," says Bob Furlong, the Richmond Fire Department's chief fire inspector.

Richmond building codes were changed in 1998 to require new buildings to have sprinklers. Hotel general manager Craig McBride says the area that burned was older. The hotel meets all current building codes and regulations, he says. Air Canada, which provided the women with the rooms after their flight from Vancouver airport was delayed, declined comment.

Sprinkler systems are rare in European hotels. In April, 24 were killed and about 60 injured in a fire at a central Paris hotel without sprinklers, the Paris-Opera Hotel.

Stewart Kidd of the trade group British Automatic Sprinkler Association estimates that less than 3% of European hotels have sprinkler systems in each room. He says France, Italy, Austria and Portugal each have fewer than 10 such hotels, the United Kingdom fewer than 100, and Germany fewer than 50.

Sprinkler requirements vary, says Alan Brinson of the European Fire Sprinkler Network, a non-profit group that promotes sprinkler use for safety and property protection. Norway, for example, requires sprinklers in new hotels with multiple stories. Other European governments set various heights — 45 feet in Hungary, 75 feet in Berlin and Frankfurt, and 90 feet in Spain — at which new hotels must be equipped with in-room sprinklers. "Existing hotels are usually grandfathered and can be very unsafe," says Brinson.

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