



Residential Smoke Detector Disposal

Most residential smoke detectors contain low levels of radioactive material which should be properly disposed. Alpha particles emitted by the radioactive material

ionize the air, making the air conductive and allowing a small electrical current to pass. Any smoke particles that enter the unit reduce this current and set off an alarm. Despite the fact that these devices save lives, the question “are smoke detectors safe?” is still asked by those with a fear of radiation. The answer, of course, is “Yes, they are safe.” Instructions for proper installation, handling, and disposal of smoke detectors are found on the package. The detectors have a limited life span, usually specified at ten years, so eventually they must be properly disposed.



Note: Change your batteries spring and fall when you change your clock.

Radioactive Material

The most common type of smoke detector contains a small amount of radioactive Americium-241. On your wall this presents no danger. However, when broken open in a landfill, the material can pose a health hazard. It is even worse in an incinerator. Americium is toxic and for this reason all detectors must, by law, be labeled as to radioactive content. In addition, the detector companies must accept returned radioactive detectors for disposal as hazardous waste. Unfortunately the companies seem to assume you'll keep the instruction booklet on hand for the entire life of the product, and don't always put good contact information on the case.

If you can't find an address on the detector contact First Alert Corporation. They make the vast majority of smoke detectors. Call them at 1-800-392-1395 and ask for a return material authorization number. With that number you can mail them your old detector. They charge about \$1.00 for each detector. Other detectors are made by a Canadian firm called American Sensors, call 1-800-387-4219 for information. Both of these companies sell detectors under many different brand names.

The environmentally appropriate disposal method is to return them to the manufacturer so that the radioactive material may be recycled and reused.