

# A Guide to Avoiding False Alarms



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<http://www.reviews.com/home-security-systems/false-alarms/>

## Researchers Estimate 94-99% of Home Security Alarms are False

In the early 2000s, police officers in Seattle were responding to 25,000 alarm calls per year, with a [97% false alarm rate](#). Similarly, each year in Oakland, the police department responds to more than [20,000 false alarms](#). Researchers from Temple University estimate that between 94-99% of all burglar alarm activations [turn out to be false](#). The resources required to respond to false alarms cost municipalities millions of dollars per year.

Over the past two decades, home security systems have become an increasingly common feature in homes across the United States. The added protection afforded by security systems is a benefit that many homeowners have found very appealing. Responding to home security alarm activations is a task that most municipalities take very seriously, but due to the sheer volume of alarm calls, effectively responding has been difficult. This is particularly troubling because so many alarm activations end up being false alarms.

In response to the challenge of thousands of false alarms, municipalities across the nation have passed ordinances aimed at ensuring police officers and other resources are appropriately utilized. These ordinances have resulted in significantly fewer false alarms, which means police officers are able to spend more time on more urgent matters. In 2004, Seattle introduced the False Alarm Program, an ordinance that required home and business owners to register security systems and began billing companies directly for use of police services. Since the passing of the ordinance, [false alarms have dropped](#) from 25,000 per year, to fewer than 11,000. Many municipalities across the nation have passed similar ordinances and seen comparable results.

### The Problem With False Alarms

Security system ordinances typically require homeowners and businesses with security systems to register and/or obtain an alarm permit. Registration fees and/or permits typically cost between \$10 and \$40, and in most cases, must be renewed on an annual basis. The charges levied by municipalities to security system companies in response to a false alarm, are often passed on to the business or home owner. Many municipalities will not charge a fee for the first false alarm, but repeat false alarm offenders can expect fees anywhere from \$70 to \$500 (check local programs for exact fee schedules).

In addition to the fiduciary obligations, reducing false alarms will result in better service and increased protection for home security system owners. Since false alarms are so prevalent, and the resources necessary to respond so expensive, the response time from police officers is not always ideal. If the number of false alarms are minimized, in the event of an actual break in, police officers will be able to respond more quickly. The goal of all security system owners should be to minimize false alarms.

### The 6 Most Common Causes of False Alarms

**Faulty equipment:** Despite the fact that most of the top home security companies utilize high-quality equipment from leading manufacturers, there may be occasions where a faulty

piece of equipment is the source of false alarms.

**Human error:** Most home security systems are fairly easy to use and do not require significant training. However, following a new installation, some homeowners don't take the necessary time to actually learn the system. It is important that any person with permission to enter the home understands how to operate the system.

**Low batteries or inconsistent power source:** Most wireless home security systems contain batteries that occasionally need to be changed and replaced. These system components typically give audible warnings when the battery levels are low, but in some cases, a low battery can trigger a false alarm. An inconsistent/unreliable power source can also be the cause of false alarms.

**Unlocked or loose doors and windows:** Door and window sensors are activated when the connection between the two sensors is disrupted. If a door or window is loose, it can easily be rattled by the wind and trigger an alarm. Doors that are locked with a deadbolt are typically more sturdy and can minimize unintentional sensor disturbances.

**Incorrect installation:** When the home security system is installed, it is critical that all sensors and detectors are appropriately aligned, and that all other equipment is installed according to the manufacturer's recommendations. Homeowners installing do-it-yourself home security systems may be particularly susceptible to incorrect installation problems.

**Pets, rodents, and insects:** Some motion detectors will be triggered by pets, rodents, or insects. Homeowners with pets should be certain the home security system has sensors that are "pet-friendly," as pets that are free to roam the house will trigger motion detectors and activate a false alarm. Rodents and insects can also trigger alarms.

## The 7 Best Ways to Reduce False Alarms

**Choose the right home security system:** The individual circumstances of a homeowner will determine what type of system is appropriate. For example, some home security systems are installed by licensed professionals, while others are installed by the homeowner. An elderly homeowner with limited mobility would likely not have the capability to install a home security system. Pet owners would also want to ensure the sensors and detectors are pet-friendly. Homeowners should take the time to learn about the features of the [best home security systems](#) before making a selection.

**Utilize a brief familiarization period:** Following the installation of a new home security system, many home security companies will allow a brief familiarization period. During this period, no signals received at the monitoring center will be dispatched to the police department or other authorities. False alarms that occur during this period will not have repercussions and give the homeowner a great opportunity to get familiar with the system. If a newly installed system is repeatedly broadcasting false alarms, the homeowner should reach out to the home security company for guidance and assistance.

**Appropriately train those with access to the home security system:** All family members, babysitters, relatives, neighbors, cleaning crews, repairman, and any other

person that has permission to be in the home, should be appropriately trained on how to use the system. This includes understanding how to arm/disarm the system, knowledge of alarm codes and passwords, and the process for cancelling an inadvertent alarm activation.

**Install a home security system with two-way communication capabilities:** Some home security keypads utilize two-way voice technology that enables the dispatcher to hear what is happening in the home. This allows the homeowner to communicate directly to the monitoring center whether a police dispatch is necessary.

**Require dual verification:** Many home security monitoring companies will have access to audio or video resources. Following an alarm activation, requiring the monitoring center to obtain an audio or visual confirmation before dispatching authorities will help reduce false alarms.

**Conduct a short debriefing after a false alarm occurs:** After a false alarm occurs, it's important to take the time to determine what triggered the alarm and to implement measures to ensure the action is avoided in the future. If the cause of the false alarm cannot be determined, homeowners should be particularly cautious.

**Perform occasional maintenance:** Homeowners should perform occasional maintenance to ensure that all sensors, detectors, cameras, and any other home security component is secured, clean, and working as designed. Excessive dust, spider webs, and loose sensors and detectors can all be the source of false alarms.

#### **Other ways to reduce false alarms:**

- Ensure all windows and doors are secure before setting the alarm
- Ensure the home security company is licensed and reputable
- Spray insect repellent around sensors and detectors twice a year
- Periodically test the home security system to ensure equipment is working appropriately
- Ensure that panic buttons or other emergency activation features are out of the reach of children
- Make certain that the monitoring center has current contact information and that call lists and emergency contacts are accurate
- Check the batteries of any wireless devices and the backup power to the primary keypad
- Designate an area in the home for the home security user manual and ensure contact information for the home monitoring system is accessible
- Be mindful of environmental changes (new pet, plants, HVAC systems, new home decorations, etc.) that may impact the home security system
- Use deadbolt locks
- Contact a professional exterminator if rodents, insects, or other pests are a repeated problem
- Inform the alarm company or monitoring center if you expect to be away from the home for an extended period of time