

How to boost your home security

Windows open to catch a breeze. Doors unlocked while you work in the garden. Wallets, purses, and other valuables left in plain sight. All those things make summer the peak season for home break-ins. Here are some simple, inexpensive ways to keep burglars at bay during the summer and year-round.

Kickproof your doors. Many burglars kick in doors to get in. But unless your door is hollow, the door is not what's allowing burglars easy entry. We tested solid-wood, fiberglass, and steel doors with increasingly hard blows from a battering ram and found little difference among the door materials. All eventually failed because the doorjamb split near the lock's strike plate. You can strengthen any exterior door by using a 1-inch-long deadbolt lock and a reinforced metal box strike. The latter cost about \$10. Use 3-inch-long screws to mount them so they lodge in the framing beyond the doorjamb. And don't overlook the door that leads into your house from the garage. For more information on entry doors, read "Doors: Material matters."

Choose the right locks. About two-thirds of the keyed door locks we tested managed to withstand our kick-in test; others needed a reinforced strike plate. The Weslock 671 (\$45) and Emteck Low Profile 8455 (\$36) were CR Best Buys among keyed locks. High-security locks from Medeco, which cost about \$175, also resisted drilling and picking. (See our Ratings of door locks, available to subscribers.) Remember to use a pull-apart key chain so your home keys stay with you when your car is valet-parked or serviced. (Learn about two interesting products from Kwikset, the SmartScan and SmartKey door locks.)

Secure glass areas. Security or safety window film can resist blows of up to 400 foot-pounds, according to manufacturer claims. 3M's 28-ply Ultra Safety and Security Clear Window Film costs \$7 to \$9 per square foot or about \$105 to \$135 for a 3x5-foot window. It should be installed by a pro, which will add to the cost.

Beef up existing window locks by inserting removable eyebolts in holes drilled into the sash where they overlap, or by adding locking scissor gates or fixed metal grilles. Finally, secure window air conditioners with sturdy screws through wood or metal framing elements so burglars can't push them in. In all cases, check that added barriers won't violate fire-safety codes or manufacturer warranties.

Keep it bright. Illuminate areas around doors, windows, and blind spots. Install lights high upon exterior walls so they can't easily be disabled. Our tests have found that solar-powered lights are too dim to provide enough light for security. But easy-to-install, low-voltage light systems and pro-installed, 120-volt lights can be connected to motion detectors and whole-house security systems. Compact fluorescent lightbulbs made for outdoor use saved energy and outlasted regular bulbs in our tests, so you won't have to change them as often. But they take longer to reach full brightness and they don't all work with motion- or light-activated fixtures, so check the package.

Landscape wisely. Tall foundation plants or high fences can provide cover for criminals. Trim tree branches that might provide access to windows, roof, or skylights. Gravel beds around the house make it easier to hear anyone lurking outside. For more landscaping and yard-care information, see our Complete Lawn & Yard Guide.

Organize your neighbors. A neighborhood watch won't cost you anything but some time. For tips, go to the National Crime Prevention Council's Web site. Staying connected is simple. Create an e-mail list or a free wiki system at www.pbwiki.com or www.mindtouch.com. You can also use these tools to coordinate agendas for meetings with police groups and archive meeting minutes.

Add an alarm. Some central-monitoring systems will call your cell phone if they can't reach you on your landline. Radio-based alarm systems that use dedicated UHF frequencies can be used as a backup or as a stand-alone solution that eliminates the need for landlines. Switching to an Internet-based phone service? Make sure it's compatible with your alarm.

Scam Alert: Don't get ripped off by an alarm company

The scenario: A representative from a home-security company knocks on your door and offers you a free alarm system in exchange for displaying his company's sign on your lawn. Swayed by the prospect of getting a security setup gratis, you sign a long-term monitoring contract and end up stuck with a shoddy installation and substandard equipment and service.

How to spot a scam: Be alarmed if a salesman says he represents, or wears clothing with logos from, manufacturers like GE and Honeywell. These firms don't sell directly to consumers and don't allow their logos to be used by others. Also be wary if the rep does not take time to assess your home's vulnerabilities or does not discuss alarm system details, alarm notification procedures, and the company's call center. Companies with "vans ready to install your system today" are another tip-off.

How to do the job right: Quality alarm systems combine audible and silent alarms triggered by sensors placed throughout the home, not just on doors and windows. Use a combination of sensor technologies for fewer false alarms and better accuracy. Silent alarms notify the monitoring station, which contacts the police. Audible alarms prompt the burglar to flee.

Expect to pay \$1 to \$2 per square foot of your home for a complete system and about \$25 per month for monitoring. Cheaper systems may use less-sophisticated sensors, says Ron Walters, the Security Industry Alarm Coalition's (SIAC) director of field operations. "Low-tech sensors don't recognize the difference between an animal and a human," he adds.

Walters recommends you look for sensors that meet American National Standards Institute and SIAC standards. The National Burglar & Fire Alarm Association certifies installers through its National Training School. And some states license alarm companies and installers.