Home is where the heart is, but it also is where most unintentional deaths and disabling injuries occur. Most people own their home, but nearly one-third of all occupied housing in the United States is rented, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. When renting a home, your safety and security is not only up to you—it is a partnership between you and your landlord. Understanding your rights and the responsibilities both you and your landlord have is vital to ensure safety and security at your rented home.

Research the property
Before signing a lease, experts recommend visiting the property. In addition to learning what type of neighborhood the property is located in, a visit can provide insight into the type of landlord you may be renting from. Brent Sobol, owner and operator of 1,100 rental units in the Atlanta area, said the upkeep of a property may indicate how well a property owner maintains the home’s safety and security.

“Do you see signs of neglect, like graffiti, broken windows, gutters full or hanging off, excessive amounts of trash?” Sobol said. “All of those things are indications that the property manager might not be doing a good job.”

Steven R. Kellman agreed. Kellman is director of the Tenants Legal Center, a San Diego-based organization that provides information and assistance to tenants. “If [the property is] being kept up, then there’s a higher likelihood the safety issues will be responded to,” he said.

Sobol said visiting the property at night can help a potential renter learn how well-lit the area is and if there is any suspicious activity that may indicate crime. Renters should check with their local police department for area crime statistics, he said, adding many departments publish such data online. Sobol also suggested asking the landlord about neighborhood watch organizations that may exist.

Inside the unit, Sobol advised checking for the presence of safety and security devices, including:

- Window locks
- Door viewers (commonly known as peepholes)
- Door chains and dead bolts
- Fire safety devices such as smoke alarms, portable fire extinguishers or sprinkler systems

Kellman said to make commonsense checks, such as ensuring the locks work and the doors and windows close properly. In a multi-unit building, he suggested knocking on a neighbor’s door and asking what he or she thinks of the

By the numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>54,500</td>
<td>(46.2 percent of total) unintentional injury deaths occurred at home in 2008.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✔️ 45 percent due to poisoning</td>
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<td>✔️ 28 percent due to falls</td>
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<tr>
<td>✔️ 5 percent from fires, burns</td>
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<tr>
<td>✔️ 5 percent from choking</td>
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21.1 million unintentional injuries occurred at home in 2009.

property. For tenants who are concerned about security, Kellman recommended finding a home that meets those needs, such as a location with a guard service or in a gated community.

Many jurisdictions also may send a police officer upon request to a home to assess its security, he added. Along those lines, some utility companies come out to inspect appliances for safety issues, such as gas leaks. Kellman also suggested hiring a qualified electrician to inspect the electrical system of a rented unit.

Research the owner
Landlords have long required prospective tenants to submit credit reports or references before renting out a unit. Renters should put prospective landlords through a similar procedure.

“Just like a landlord desires to screen a tenant for suitability, a tenant should screen their landlord for professionalism,” Sobol said.

Ask a potential landlord for professional references, and check to see if the owner is a member of a professional property management association. According to Sobol, it is not unusual for an owner to invest in rental property without any experience in being a professional landlord.

Kellman agreed that belonging to an organization increases the likelihood that a property owner follows the laws, but stressed it is no guarantee. Likewise, an owner who only has one unit for rent may be an extremely good landlord, Kellman said.

Know your rights
After deciding where you are going to live, sign a clear lease agreement defining obligations for yourself and the property owner, Sobol said. But even with such a lease, know the legal obligations of the owner and your rights as a renter.

“In most jurisdictions, the landlord is primarily responsible for maintenance,” Kellman said. He warned that some landlords may attempt to shift responsibilities to tenants in a lease, which is not valid in many states. Routine or normal maintenance, such as appliance repair and plumbing, are usually the responsibility of the landlord.

Any event in which maintenance is neglected and a hazard is created should prompt a reaction from the tenant. “Forcing a tenant to live in a substandard condition is improper,” Kellman said.

When confronted with a maintenance issue that needs correcting, talk to your landlord and put the request for repair in writing so a record exists. If after a reasonable amount of time the issue is not fixed, consider speaking with the owner, Sobol said. If the problem still persists, contact the building inspectors or code compliance office of your local municipality for assistance.

“If there’s a safety hazard, there’s a high likelihood it’s going to be a code violation,” Kellman said, noting building codes are designed to protect against safety hazards.

Some tenants may be afraid of retaliation for reporting building hazards to the local authorities. Kellman said most local jurisdictions and the federal government have laws protecting tenants from such retaliation that may include rent increases or attempted eviction.

Health conditions
Some areas of a rental unit may cause health concerns. According to Sobol, federal housing law requires a landlord to disclose whether he or she is aware of lead-based paint in the building.

If intact or covered over, lead paint poses no hazard. But paint that starts to peel or chip away is a concern because it can cause health problems if ingested. In many jurisdictions, landlords must rectify lead-paint issues if they become a problem by peeling or chipping, Kellman said.

Mold also may be an issue, which could cause health complications for some people. “If you see excessive moisture, or excessive dampness, and a lack of ventilation, that is a recipe for mold and mildew,” Kellman said.

If mold is suspected, Kellman recommended contacting the landlord to fix the problem.

Radon may be an issue for renters in some areas of the country. A naturally occurring radioactive gas, radon can lead to lung cancer, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Most prominently found in the Midwest and mountainous states, radon is typically detected in living spaces below grade, such as basement units, and more likely to be found in units with a cracked foundation, Sobol said.

Sobol recommended tenants research the area they are living in to see if it carries a radon risk, buy a radon detector if they are concerned and address the issue with their landlord.

Regardless of whose responsibility safety and security may be, Kellman stressed the need for renters to do as much as they can themselves to ensure their home is safe and secure. “The tenant needs to ... become proactive in their own safety,” he said.

Security tips

- **Always lock your dead bolt** when you leave and after you arrive home. The dead bolt should be at least 1 inch long.
- **Always lock** your windows.
- **Never label your home keys** with your address or unit number.
- **Keep common doors closed** and locked.
- **Notify the landlord** if light bulbs in common areas burn out.
- **Keep your curtains or blinds** closed when gone for an extended period of time.
- **Use your door viewer** before opening your door.

Source: Tenant Resource Center, Madison, WI