

FIRE SAFETY: SPECIAL SITUATIONS AND LEARN NOT TO BURN -PART III

Fire Safety for Older Adults and Individuals with Mobility Disabilities

Older adults and people who have mobility disabilities that might impede their escape from fire in the home should have interconnected smoke alarms installed inside their sleeping areas in addition to the detectors outside of their bedrooms. It's a good idea to install a land phone line or have a cell phone in their sleeping area within easy reach. If possible, people with mobility disabilities should sleep on the first floor with a door leading directly to the outside. If their bedroom must be upstairs, work out a special escape plan to assist them in the event of a fire. Be sure your fire department knows your household includes someone who may have difficulty escaping a fire. If someone in your home is hearing impaired, you can install special smoke alarms to meet their needs.

Young children. You may not be able to reach your children during a fire emergency, so they must understand how to escape without your help. During home exit (practice) fire drills, stress your confidence in their ability to escape on their own and have them practice their escape routes. Children under the age of three years old should be involved in practice fire drills, but realistically, they may not be able to escape a fire on their own. If possible, their bedrooms should adjoin the room of an adult or older child. Your family escape plan should designate responsibility for helping young children escape to specific members of your household.

Baby-sitters. Your escape plan can protect your family even when you're not home. Show your baby-sitter your floor plan and explain the escape routes. Be sure he or she knows about your meeting place and the location of several neighbors' homes from which to call the fire department. Put fire and other emergency numbers and your address near all phones in case there is a fire. The numbers by the phone will also help if there is a fire at the neighbor's home. Always leave a phone number where you can be reached in an emergency. Make it clear to your baby-sitter that if a fire occurs, your only concern is that everyone gets out safely. If the smoke alarm sounds, no one should try to fight the fire, much less try to put it out. And no one should waste time gathering belongings.

Pets. A serious fire is so dangerous that you simply do not have time to consider anything but saving human lives. Dogs and cats are naturally terrified of fire and have a pretty good chance of surviving. However, if a pet is trapped inside your home, tell the firefighters. Restrain children who might be tempted to return to your burning home to find a pet.

LEARN NOT TO BURN. Your best protection from fires is to prevent them. The following fire hazards were chosen for specific discussion because they are the leading cause of home fires. But you should develop the habit of recognizing any situation where fuel and heat might come together to start a fire in your home.

Home fire hazards. Learn to protect yourself and your household from the major causes of home fires by taking these basic precautions:

Smoking materials. Smoking is the leading cause of fatal home fires. If you smoke, always use large, heavy, non-tip ashtrays. Don't let ashtrays become so full that hot ashes might spill over the side. Douse or soak butts and ashes before dumping them into a wastebasket. Before going to sleep or leaving home – especially if people have been drinking alcohol and smoking – check your furniture for butts. A cigarette that falls into upholstery can smolder for hours before bursting into flames. Never smoke in bed or when drowsy, intoxicated, or medicated. Keep matches and lighters up high, locked away, out of the reach of small children, and buy only lighters that have a child-resistant safety feature.

Cooking. Stove burners, ovens, and microwave ovens can cause severe burns and start fires. The same is true of counter-top appliances such as toasters, coffeemakers and toaster ovens. Be sure all your kitchen appliances bear the label of independent testing lab and are in proper working order. Never cook when you are drowsy, intoxicated or taking medications that make you sleepy. Keep pan lids near your stove. If a small grease fire starts in a pan, smother the flames by carefully sliding a large lid (or a larger pan) over the pan and then turn off the burner. Leave the pan covered until everything is completely cool. Don't peek. Lifting the lid will let oxygen in and fire may reignite. Never pour water on a grease fire or try to carry the pan outside or to the sink. Likewise, discharging a fire extinguisher at a pan of burning grease could splatter the contents and

possibly spread the fire. If a fire starts in your oven, close the oven door and turn off the oven. If a fire starts in a microwave oven, push the stop button or unplug the microwave oven and leave the door closed until the fire goes out.

In the kitchen, follow these basic fire safety practices:

- ~ Never leave cooking unattended and keep potholders, towels, food packaging and other clutter away from the burners.
- ~ Keep your stove top and oven clean. Grease and other food residues can catch fire.
- ~ Wear short, close-fitting or tightly rolled-up sleeves when cooking. Loose clothing can dangle onto the stove burners and catch fire.
- ~ Always use fire-resistant oven mitts or potholders. Caution: using a wet oven mitt can cause a steam burn.
- ~ Turn pot handles inward so pots can't be knocked off the stove or pulled down by small children.
- ~ Maintain a kid-free zone 3 feet (1 meter) around your stove and keep pets away while you cook.
- ~ Do not store combustibles, such as paper bags near a stove where they could catch fire. Never store anything where someone might be burned reaching for it.
- ~ Food cooked in a microwave oven can be dangerously hot. Remove the lids or other coverings from microwaved foods carefully to prevent being burned by the steam.
- ~ Teach your children that hot lids can cause painful burns.

Heating appliances: Be sure all portable or fixed space heaters you buy bear the label of an independent testing laboratory. Keep all movable combustibles (e.g., newspapers, cloth, or furniture) at least 3 feet (1 meter) away from fireplaces and space heaters. Keep portable space heaters at least 3 feet (1 meter) away from walls as well. Portable kerosene heaters are illegal in some communities and

states. If kerosene heaters are allowed where you live, use them with care especially when refueling them. Always use the proper grade of kerosene, never gasoline or other fuels. Refuel kerosene heaters in a well-ventilated area preferably outside and only when the heater is completely cool. If you have a coal or wood-burning stove or a gas-burning cabinet heater or any other built-in space heater, have it inspected by your local fire department to be sure it is installed and vented properly. Never store LP-gas tanks inside your home.

Inefficient combustion caused by burning green wood or by the poor design of some wood-burning stoves or fireplaces can produce quantities of creosote, which cause chimney fires. Creosote build-up is the fuel for potentially dangerous and destructive chimney fires. Keep wood-burning stoves clean and in good working order. Have your chimney inspected at least once a year and cleaned and repaired as often as necessary.

Keep fireplace fires small and always use a fireplace screen to prevent sparks from flying into the room. Never use a wood-burning stove or fireplace to burn paper or trash; burning fragments can be carried up the chimney when they can ignite creosote or land on your roof. Allow ashes to cool before disposing of them. Remove ashes in a tightly covered metal container, never in boxes or bags.

Have your central-heating system inspected and cleaned once a year and whenever you suspect a problem.

Check the flues of your gas water heater or furnace for corrosion or obstructions that could present fire hazards.

Arson. The majority of arson fires are started by young people, often as a reaction to real or perceived stresses, sometimes as a desperate and misguided cry for help. Schools, communities, law enforcement authorities, and fire departments can work together to provide appropriate professional help to young people who start fires. One way to protect your home from arson is to eliminate convenient sources of fuel such as trash or brush piles near your home. Lock up cans of flammable liquids stored in your shed or garage and use outdoor lights to illuminate your property at night to discourage trespassers.

Children playing with fire. Children are naturally curious and fascinated by fire. Until they are taught to respect fire, they can't be expected to understand the dangers involved. Teach the children in your household the basics of fire safety. Most important, teach them that matches and lighters are tools for adults, not children's toys. Teach young children to tell a grown-up if they find matches or lighters around the home. Store all matches and lighters up high (about an adult shoulder height), out of children's reach and preferably in a locked cabinet. Take any evidence of child-set fires seriously. Calmly, but firmly, explain that this dangerous behavior must stop immediately. Seek professional help from your local fire department or mental health professional if the behavior persists or there is other evidence that the message has not been effective.

Electrical systems and related equipment: Electrical equipment can cause fires by throwing sparks, arcing or overheating. Keep your entire home's electrical equipment, including appliances not designed to produce heat, in good working order. Use electrical equipment only for the job it was designed to do and have it installed, serviced and repaired by qualified specialists.

Wall outlets. Most wall outlets are "duplex" receptacles with two sockets. Only one heat-producing appliance, such as a coffeemaker, waffle iron or toaster should be plugged into a receptacle at a time. Special electrical equipment that draws a large amount of current, such as air conditioners and large space heaters, should be plugged into separate heavy-duty electrical circuits. If you're not sure what "load" (amount of current) your circuits are designed to handle safely, have an electrician inspect your electrical wiring. If there are small children in your household, insert plastic child-protector covers in unused wall sockets and extension-cord receptacles.

GFCIs. Ground-fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) are electrical devices that can protect you from injury due to electrical shock. GFCIs can be installed at wall receptacles or in extension cords. They monitor the flow of current through the circuit they protect and immediately cut off the flow of electricity if there is a serious imbalance, thus shortening the duration of any shock you may experience.

GFCIs respond faster than fuses or circuit breakers do, greatly reducing the risk of shock injury. GFCIs should be installed by a professional electrician.

Fuses and circuit breakers. Fuses are designed to “blow” and disconnect power from an electrical circuit in the event of an overload. The size amperage of the fuse should match the load each circuit in your home is designed to handle. If a fuse blows, find out what overloaded the circuit and correct the problem before you replace the fuse. Circuit breakers do the same job as fuses but they must be reset, rather than replaced, when they break the circuit due to overload. The size of circuit breakers should match the load of the circuit it protects. Never install higher amperage fuses or circuit breakers to prevent chronic overloading unless your circuit has been inspected by a professional. Instead, eliminate the source of the overload or have an electrician upgrade the load-carrying capacity of the circuit. Never bypass fuses by jamming pennies into fuse sockets or splicing your wiring to bypass circuit breakers. Keep a supply of appropriate-size fuses on hand.

Extension cords. Misused extension cords are a fire hazard. Plug only one appliance into an extension cord. Don’t run extension cords across doorways or under carpets or pinch them under or behind furniture. Never hang extension cords over nails; the insulation could deteriorate and expose a live wire. If you use a lot of extension cords, your home may have inadequate wiring for your needs. Consider having additional circuits or outlets added.

Appliances. Unplug appliances after use. If the inside of an appliance gets wet, have it serviced professionally before using it again. Allow sufficient air space around heat-producing appliances, such as TVs, VCRs, cable boxes, stereo components, and computers to prevent overheating. Be sure all your appliances bear the label of an independent testing laboratory.

Cords. Check all electrical cords for cracks, frays, broken plugs and loose connections. Replace any cord that’s in poor condition or gets hot when in use.

Lamps. Lamps that fall over easily are fire hazards, as are lamps whose shades sit too close to their bulbs. Look for labels on lighting fixtures specifying the fixture’s maximum wattage capacity and do not use a larger bulb. Each lamp

should have a shade so that if the lamp does fall over the bulb won't shatter. If you buy an old lamp from a yard sale, play it safe and have it rewired before using it.

Open Flames. Candle fires are one of the very few types of home fires that have been increasing over the past decade and a half. Candles and oil-burning lamps should have stable holders and should be used in open, well-ventilated areas away from combustibles. If you are leaving a room, extinguish all flames. Never leave a child alone with an open flame, even briefly. Keep flashlights and batteries ready in case your electric power goes out. Walking around with a candle during an emergency could be dangerous.

Flammable and combustible liquids. All flammable and combustible vapors can catch fire from a spark. Even ordinary nail polish is a flammable liquid and should not be used near an open flame. Never smoke when you work with flammable or combustible liquids, including lacquers and paint thinners, and don't store them near any source of sparks, heat, or flame. Many aerosol products, such as paint and hair spray are flammable liquids stored under pressure. Use these products carefully and away from heat or flame. Follow the directions on the can for disposal. Oily rags, such as those used during painting projects, give off flammable fumes and can catch fire easily. Store oily rags in a tightly sealed metal container, or "harden" them by hanging them to dry outside and then discard them. Use gasoline as a motor fuel only. It is too dangerous to use gasoline as a solvent or cleaner, or for any other use. If you keep a small amount of gasoline on hand for a lawnmower, chainsaw, or other small gas-fueled appliance, never store it in the home. Never bring even a small quantity inside. Store it in the garage or shed in an unbreakable, sealed and properly labeled container. Keep oil-based paints and other flammable liquids sealed tight in their original containers. It is dangerous to store any flammable liquid in a glass container, plastic jug, or other makeshift container.

Fire Safe Behavior. Heat, fire, flammable liquids and electricity are all useful tools that we encounter daily. Yet every time you use these tools, there is a risk of fire. Learn to be fire conscious and use such tools wisely.

Gasoline Powered Engines. Lawnmowers, motor bikes, chainsaws, snow blowers and lawn-and-garden tractors are useful machines that require safe handling of gasoline. A single spark can ignite gasoline vapors, causing fire and explosion. Allow gasoline-powered engines to cool completely before refueling them. After filling the tank, close the gasoline container before starting the engine. Soak up spills using clay cat box litter. When refilling a portable gasoline container, set it on the ground. Never fill gasoline containers while they're in a car truck or on a truck bed. When you fill a portable gasoline container, make sure the container is not completely full. Gasoline vapors expand under ordinary climate conditions and could build up dangerous pressure levels in a too-full container. Leave some room for expansion and be sure the container is capped tight. Never carry containers of gasoline in the passenger compartment of your car. Never smoke around gasoline or other flammable liquids.

Barbecuing. Use barbecue grills only outdoors. Indoors, they are serious hazards because they produce carbon monoxide in quantities that could be lethal in enclosed spaces. And, flare-ups could set nearby combustibles on fire. For the same reason, keep outdoor barbecue grills away from your home and from combustibles, such as shrubs, brush and piles of leaves. Watch fires and hot charcoal grills at all times. People have been burned severely using gasoline to start or feed charcoal fires. Use only a proper liquid charcoal lighter or another charcoal starting device and never add any combustible liquid to a lit charcoal fire. If your fire begins to die, add dry kindling and fan the fire to revive it.

When you are finished cooking, wait until the coals are cool before leaving the grill. If you are in a hurry, douse the coals with water, keeping your body clear of all steam and smoke. If you use a grill fueled by LP gas, periodically check all fuel-line connections for leaks by coating them with a solution of soap and water and watching for bubbles that indicate leaking gas. If your connections are not tight, have the unit serviced by a qualified specialist. Light LP-gas grills according to the manufacturer's instructions. Turn off burner valves and the supply valve on the LP-gas cylinder when the grill is not in use. Never store an LP-gas grill indoors.

Camping. Use flashlights, not candles or oil lamps, inside your tent. When buying tents or sleeping bags, make sure they are labeled “fire retardant.” Pitch tents a safe distance upwind of your campfire.

Children’s Sleepwear. Children’s sleepwear requires special attention. Many fabrics will burn with relative ease. Fuzzy, lightweight and loosely woven fabrics burn readily. Denim and wool are less likely to burn quickly. Loose clothing, especially loose sleeves, should never be worn near open flames or other heat sources, such as stove-top burners. As of 1996, children’s sleepwear size 0 to 14 is no longer required to pass flame-retardant tests. Sleepwear for children is now legal if it provides a tight fit. Parents must now be careful that the sleepwear they provide their children either is flame-resistant or is worn snugly to try to protect against clothing fire. T-shirts and other day wear are inappropriate for children to sleep in and have led to hundreds of burn injuries when used as sleepwear.

Holidays and Celebrations. When making Halloween costumes, avoid using flimsy material, or voluminous amounts of fabric (such as sheets), or paper. These materials can ignite easily. Have children carry flashlights, not lit candles, when wearing costumes. When buying ready-made Halloween costumes, make sure they’re labeled “flame-retardant” or “flame-resistant.” Many Halloween and Thanksgiving decorations are dry and burn easily. Keep such decorations away from fireplaces, heat sources and open flame. Use flashlights instead of candles inside jack-o-lanterns. When handled by professionals, fireworks add to our enjoyment of many holidays, such as the Fourth of July, Canada Day, Chinese New Year and Mardi Gras. But don’t let holiday fun turn into tragedy.

Some fireworks are legal for amateurs in some areas, but that doesn’t mean they’re safe. Even sparklers injure hundreds of children each year. The same fireworks that are legal in some states have been banned in many others because of the injuries, fires, and deaths they cause. Stay away from amateur use of fireworks and teach children to avoid them as well. Attend only public pyrotechnic displays put on by trained professionals and stay back at least 500 feet from the display.

The winter holidays – Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and New Year’s -- are good times to be especially cautious about fire in the home. Be careful using candles. Keep them well out of the reach of children and blow them out when you leave the room. Buy a fresh Christmas tree that’s not shedding its needles. Trim at least an inch off the bottom of the trunk and install your tree in a large non-tip stand with an ample reservoir for water. Position the tree away from heat sources, fireplaces and exit routes. Water your tree daily. Remove your tree soon after Christmas or earlier if it begins noticeably shedding its needles. A dry Christmas tree is so dangerous that it should not be left in or even near your home while awaiting disposal, not even with your trash. If you buy an artificial Christmas tree, be sure it is labeled “flame retardant.” Read all warnings carefully, paying special attention to manufacturer’s instructions about the appropriate number and size of decorative lights. Never put electric lights on a metal tree. That creates a serious shock hazard. If your decorative Christmas-tree lights are worn or have loose connections, replace them. When shopping for lights, buy only those that bear the label of an independent testing lab. If you decorate with lights outdoors, use only lights that are insulated and labeled for outdoor use. Always unplug or switch off all decorative lights – including outdoor lights – before leaving your home or going to bed.

Keep fire safety in mind at holiday parties, especially those where people are drinking and smoking. Provide smokers with large, deep, non-tip ashtrays and keep cigarettes and smoking materials away from Christmas trees and flammable decorations. Soak the contents of ashtrays before dumping them into a waste basket. Check your furniture for smoldering butts after the party and make sure no one has left matches or lighters within reach of children.

Building Fire Safety Into Your Home. Whenever you are building, remodeling or expanding your home, you have the opportunity to protect your household from fire. Buy your materials with fire safety in mind.

Home fire sprinkler systems. Consider installing fire sprinklers in your new or remodeled home.

Walls. Gypsum drywall board offers considerable fire resistance.

Paneling. Look for fire-resistant paneling with a label that specifies a “flame-spread rating.” The lower the rating, the better. In new construction, install a layer of half-inch (1.3 centimeter) gypsum board between your paneling and your wall insulation.

Ceilings. Read labels on ceiling materials carefully and buy only ceiling tiles that bear the label of an independent testing lab.

Insulation. Before installing insulation, check your home electrical system for any problems. Keep insulation 3 inches (7.6 centimeters) away from lighting fixtures to avoid heat build-up. Look for the seal of an independent testing lab and check the flame-spread rating of the insulation you buy. (Remember: lower ratings are better.)

Alternative heating. When buying a wood-burning stove, be sure the unit is made of cast-iron or heavy steel, carries the label of an independent testing lab and has a damper to control draft or a modern system of build-in-air controls. Read the manufacturer’s instructions and contact your local government for local safety codes and observe the required clearances between such a stove and walls or ceilings.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE IN A FIRE OR GET BURNED

Stop, Drop and Roll --- Cool and Call. If your clothing catches fire, stop where you are. Don’t run; the air rushing by you could fan the fire. Drop to the ground. Cover your face with your hands if you can. Roll over and over or back and forth to smother the flames. Then, cool the burned area with water and call for help. Have everyone in the family – including children – practice this lifesaving method. If someone else’s clothes catch fire, you may have to help them. If they do not drop to the ground by themselves, tackle them or knock them down and make them roll over and over. Or, throw a heavy blanket or rug over the person to smother the flames.

First aid for burns. Treat burns immediately. First-degree burns (reddened skin) are minor and heal quickly. Second-degree burns (blistered skin) are serious injuries that require immediate first aid and professional treatment. For first-

degree and second-degree burns, cool the burned area with cool water for 10 to 15 minutes. This will lower the victim's skin temperature, stop the burning process and reduce swelling. Do not apply ice. Third-degree burns (white, brown or charred tissue, often surrounded by blisters) are severe injuries and require emergency professional medical treatment. Cool third-degree burns only with wet sterile dressings until medical help arrives. Lay the victim flat on his or her back and remove burned clothing that isn't stuck to the victim's skin. Remove jewelry and tight clothing from around the burned area before swelling sets in. Elevate burned areas. Never put butter, ointments, or any other form of grease on a burn. Grease insulates the skin, keeping in the heat and making the injury worse. Learn to identify the three types of burns that have been mentioned.

Note: Remember that fires can happen in any home. As a SFC provider, you need to understand the importance of forming fire-safety habits in the home and know how to respond to fire emergencies. Good fire-safety habits can save your life, your family members' lives and the lives of individuals that you care for.

The information for Part 3 was provided by the National Fire Protection Association's "Fire in Your Home: Prevention and Survival" – a NFPA booklet.