

fire and burn safety for seniors



Lori Grifa, Commissioner
Department of Community Affairs

Lawrence Petrillo
State Fire Marshal



Honorable Christopher Christie
Governor

Fire Safety Facts

Older adults (age 65 and older) suffer twice as many fire deaths as the general population. People 85 and over are four times as likely to die in a fire than members of other age groups.

Fire presents a bigger risk to the elderly. Their physical reaction times may be slowed; their senses of sight, hearing and smell may be diminished; and they may be drowsy or disoriented because of medication they are required to take. When a fire starts, the elderly are likely to need more time to escape from a fire area, and may need the assistance of others to do so.

Smoking, cooking, electrical & heating systems, and the operation of appliances all pose dangers to the elderly. Clothing fires are of special concern. The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that 83% of deaths resulting from sleepwear fires involve people who are over 65.

More than half of all fires can be prevented through a combination of fire prevention education and appropriate corrective action. Although there are thousands of possible causes of accidental fires, this booklet focuses on providing fire prevention instructions in areas of major concern to elderly Americans. By making our elders aware of how accidental house fires can be prevented, we can hopefully reduce the terrible suffering, injuries and deaths that are caused each year by fire.

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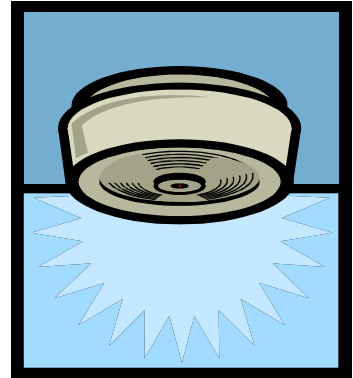
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Smoke and CO Alarms Protectors of the Elderly

Smoke alarms are the most effective low-cost fire protection devices you can buy. Every home should have a smoke alarm on every level and outside each sleeping area.

Properly installed, positioned and maintained smoke alarms double your chances of surviving an accidental house fire.



When a smoke alarm detects smoke from a fire, they sound a loud, piercing alarm which instantly alerts you, or awakens you to the danger of fire, even if you're asleep. Your chances of survival are increased because your detector provides you with an early warning, extra time to escape, and additional time for the fire department to save your property!

Many people **MISTAKENLY** believe that if they ever had a fire, they would be awakened by the smell of smoke in time to escape.



**NOTHING COULD BE
FURTHER FROM THE
TRUTH!**

Smoke from a fire contains carbon monoxide, which disorients people, dulls their senses, and makes them lose consciousness. If you are already asleep, it puts you into a **DEEPER** sleep, and can eventually kill you! This is one reason why most people die of smoke inhalation in home fires rather than from burns.



The peak time for home fire fatalities is between midnight and 8AM when most people are asleep.

You NEED a smoke alarm to wake you up if you ever have a fire at night. Every home should have at least one smoke detector on every level of the home. For additional protection, place an alarm in the hallway outside bedroom areas; inside every bedroom where a smoker sleeps; inside rooms where portable heaters are being used; and inside bedrooms where people sleep with the doors closed. Smoke alarms should generally be installed on the ceiling, as close to the center as possible. Read and follow the manufacturer's instructions for installation.

To prevent nuisance alarms, install them at least 20 feet away from kitchens, furnaces, hot water heaters and space heaters. If a nuisance alarm does go off (from burning toast, for example), just take a magazine or newspaper and fan the detector until the alarm stops.

NEVER DISCONNECT AN ALARM OR REMOVE ITS BATTERIES!

Testing Your Smoke Alarms

Like any other electro-mechanical device, smoke alarms are subject to breakdown and failure as they age. This is why it is important to test your alarms on a monthly basis to be sure that they are still protecting you. To test your alarm, just press and hold down the detector's test button. If you can't reach it, use a broom handle to press the button. If the alarm goes off after you've depressed the button for a few seconds, then you know that you and your detector are okay.

Maintenance of Your Smoke Alarms

A smoke alarm that doesn't work because its batteries are dead is no better than having no smoke alarm at all. To keep your smoke alarm working as your guardian against fire, you should make sure that you change the batteries when required. A good idea is to change your smoke alarm's batteries when clocks change back from daylight savings time each spring and fall.

Change Your Clock Change your Battery

Immediately after installing a fresh battery, make sure that it was installed correctly by pressing the test button for a few seconds. If the alarm sounds, then you're okay. If it doesn't, make sure that the battery contacts were seated properly. Get someone to help you if necessary.

Also, vacuum the grill on your smoke detector's cover about once a month to remove dust and cobwebs, which can affect your alarm's sensitivity and prevent it from doing its job.

Steps to Prevent Fire

Your home is your castle - but it can be dangerous if you don't take precautions. In the United States, fire strikes a home about once every minute, and more than 75% of all fire deaths occur in home fires.

Don't give fire a chance to strike your home. There are very simple and easy things you can do immediately to prevent a fire from starting. There are also some simple ways to be ready for a fire if one does start in your home. Although fire can strike anywhere, the following do's and don'ts will help keep you safe:

- * **DON'T** leave food cooking unattended on the stove. If you **MUST** leave the kitchen, pick up something like a spoon and take it with you to remind yourself that you are cooking.



- * **DON'T** overload your electrical outlets. One appliance into each electrical receptacle at a time.
- * **DON'T smoke carelessly. NEVER SMOKE IN BED!!!**
It's too easy to get drowsy and fall asleep while smoking! Don't even smoke in a comfortable chair if there's a chance you might doze off.

More Steps to Prevent Fire

- * **DON'T** wear clothing with long, loose sleeves that will hang over stovetop burners while you are cooking.
- * **DON'T** operate portable heaters near anything that might catch on fire.
- * **DO** test your smoke detectors regularly to make sure that they work properly.
- * **DO** set your water heater thermostat to a lower setting. Most people set them to higher temperatures, which heats water enough to cause serious burns.
- * **DO** plan on how you would escape from your home if you ever have a fire. Figure out two ways of getting out of every room in the house, just in case the fire prevents you from leaving by your usual way.
- * **DO** remember that if a fire starts in your home, you should get yourself and everyone else out of the house immediately, call 911 from your cell phone, and **NEVER** go back inside a burning house for any reason.

Hints for Smokers

A LEADING CAUSE OF FIRE FATALITIES IS ACCIDENTAL HOUSE FIRES STARTED BY THE CARELESS USE OF SMOKING MATERIALS.

About a thousand people die each year in fires started by the use of smoking materials -- matches, lighters and cigarettes.

Falling asleep while smoking is the most common cause of serious burn injury to the elderly, and often results in fatalities.

It doesn't take much imagination to figure out how this happens. Typically, the older smoker is tired, fatigued, and often under the influence of alcohol or medication. He or she sits down in a comfortable upholstered chair, lights up a cigarette, and turns on the TV. After a little while, they begin to feel drowsy, and then fall asleep.

The cigarette falls from their hand onto their lap, the chair, or the rug. Or, the cigarette may have been placed in an ashtray on the arm of the chair, and when the smoker falls asleep, he knocks the ash tray over without ever waking up.

Cigarettes continue to burn even though they are not puffed, and will ignite fabric and other materials used in upholstered furniture. If undetected, these cigarettes can smolder for hours before a flare-up occurs and ignites combustibles such as clothing, upholstery, the rug, newspapers or draperies.

**DON'T LOSE YOUR LIFE
BECAUSE OF SMOKING CARELESSLY!!!**

NEVER SMOKE IN BED

- Don't smoke when you are tired, drowsy, drinking, or taking medication that makes you sleepy.
- Install smoke alarms in rooms frequently used by smokers.
- Dispose of cigarette butts properly. Make absolutely sure that all materials have been extinguished and have cooled off before disposing of them.
- Use only safe ash trays.



What is a safe ash tray?



Safe ash trays are large and stable, not easy to tip over accidentally, and have a central island for burning cigarettes so that the cigarettes cannot fall out of the ashtray if they are unattended.

Safe ash trays make excellent gifts for smokers.

Cooking Safely



Kitchens are full situations that can be hazardous if you get careless. The same situations, however, can be safe if you pay attention and take simple precautions.

The most dangerous place of all in the kitchen is the area around the stove. Cooking grease and oils can ignite, and so can combustible materials around the stove, such as paper towels, cereal boxes, potholders, etc. Loose clothing, especially hanging sleeves, could brush up against stove burners and cause a serious clothing fire. You must be very careful in the kitchen, particularly when using the stove.

**Cooking Is the Leading
Cause Of Home Fires.**

BUT...!

Most Cooking Fires Are Preventable

- PREVENT A COOKING FIRE IN YOUR KITCHEN-

* Stay in the kitchen while you cook. You'll get no unpleasant surprises, and you'll be less likely to burn the pot roast. If you have to leave the kitchen, turn off the heat.

* Keep the stovetop clean and clear of anything flammable, such as food containers, towels (especially paper towels), potholders, etc

* Wear short sleeves, or sleeves that fit snugly around your arms. Loose clothing is far more likely to catch on fire.

Loose sleeves can be rolled back or fastened with pins or elastic bands while cooking.



* Keep two things handy while you cook in case you need them: a large lid, which can be used to extinguish the flames in a burning pot or pan if necessary; and a portable fire extinguisher, which can put out a kitchen fire. (Check with your local fire department for advice on what kind of extinguisher to buy.) Follow the instructions that come with the extinguisher.

* When using pots and pans, turn their handles inward, toward the center of the stove, so it's less likely that anyone will pull or accidentally knock them over. A falling piece of hot cookware could easily result in painful burns, so turn handles inward, away from danger.

- PREVENT A COOKING FIRE IN YOUR KITCHEN-

* If a fire starts in a pan on the stovetop, carefully place a lid over the burning pan, then turn off the burner.

NEVER POUR WATER ON AN OIL OR GREASE FIRE.



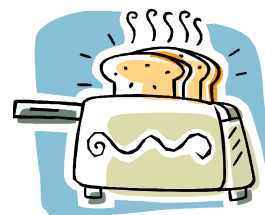
* If a fire starts inside the oven, turn off the heat and keep the oven door closed to suffocate the flames. Call the fire department if the fire does not go out immediately.

* If a fire starts inside your microwave oven, keep the door shut and push the stop button. Leave the door closed until the fire is out. If the fire does not go out immediately, call the fire department.

* If your clothing catches on fire, **DO NOT RUN**. Running will make the fire spread faster. **STOP** where you are, **DROP** to the ground, and **ROLL** back and forth to extinguish the flames. Cover your face with your hands while rolling.

This is called **STOP, DROP & ROLL**.

* If you burn yourself while cooking, run **COOL** (not cold) water over the burn. **NEVER PUT BUTTER OR OINTMENT ON A BURN - it will only make it worse.** If you are burned badly, see a doctor.



* Try to use your kitchen fire extinguisher on small stove top fires.

* If it has spread to a larger area, evacuate without delay.

Never go back inside a burning house for any reason!

Heating Your Home Safely



There are more home fires during the months of December, January and February than at any other time of the year. That's because heating equipment fires are the number one cause of home fire deaths during the winter months. Tens of thousands of home heating fires kill hundreds of people,

on the average, every year.

The good news is that most of these fires are preventable - it's just a matter of taking the steps that are necessary to avoid them.

- * If you live in your own home, have your heating system inspected and cleaned, if necessary, by a trained professional **BEFORE** the start of each heating season.
- * Heaters generate heat - so don't place anything that can burn near them. Leave at least five feet of space around them, just to be on the safe side.
- * If you have a fireplace and use it, have the chimney inspected by a professional prior to the start of every heating season, and cleaned if necessary.
- * When wood burns, creosote can build up in chimneys and can cause a fire. Always have a screen over the fireplace when you are using it.

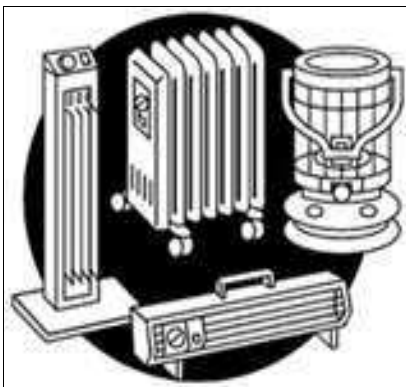
Things To Watch Out For When Using Portable Heaters

More and more people are using portable heaters, and as the use of these heaters increases, so does the potential for hazards.

If you are one of the people who use a device commonly described as a “space heater,” “room heater,” “auxiliary heater,” “area heater,” or “portable heater,” you’ll be safer as well as warmer if you make sure that you have a smoke detector in the room in which your portable heater is used.



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And if your heater uses fuel, such as kerosene, wood or coal, you should know that fuel-fired heaters pose the additional threat of carbon monoxide poisoning.

These kinds of heaters should only be used in conjunction with a smoke alarm **AND** a carbon monoxide alarm. Both types of alarms can be purchased inexpensively at most hardware stores.

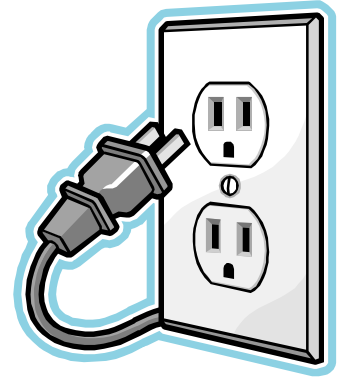
More Tips For Portable Heaters

- * Don't purchase an electric heater unless it has the label of an independent testing laboratory (such as UL), a tipover switch that will cut off power to the unit if it is knocked over, and a grill to keep fingers and flammables away from heating elements.
- * Read and follow all instructions for operating the heater.
- * Place portable heaters well away from all flammable materials such as curtains, drapes, newspapers, rugs and furniture.
- * Keep electric heaters (and all other electrical appliances) away from water, and never touch them if you are wet.
- * Be sure that the plug of the electrical cord is in good condition and fits snugly into the outlet. A loose plug can overheat. If the heater's power cord is frayed, have it replaced by a professional electrical technician. If the cord or plug feels too hot to the touch while the heater is operating, shut off the heater and unplug it.
- * Dispose of all older open faced heating element heaters



Electrical Wiring & Appliances

Many older homes have few electrical outlets, or outlets at inconvenient places. This situation can create home fire hazards by encouraging the use of extension cords and overloaded outlets. An outlet becomes overloaded when the appliances connected to them are drawing more electrical current than the outlet can handle. When this happens, wiring can get hot and radiate enough heat to walls, paneling, etc. to cause a fire.

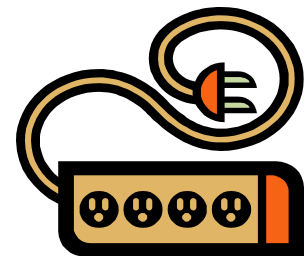


To eliminate these risks:

*** If you don't have enough electrical outlets in your home, have a professional licensed electrician rewire your home and add more.**

*** If rewiring isn't possible, limit the number of appliances you connect to each outlet. Plug in no more than one electrical appliance to each electrical receptacle.**

Electrical cords on appliances should be examined regularly for signs of wear. Too often, we tend to take these cords for granted and use them without ever checking them. Inspect your cords. If cords are frayed or cracked, have them replaced by a qualified electrical technician immediately.



3 things to watch out for when using extension cords:



1. NEVER RUN EXTENSION CORDS UNDER RUGS OR CARPETS. When extension cords are run under a carpet, walking over the rug may wear the cord's insulating covering away, expose the wires, and possibly set fire to the rug.

2. People sometimes use extension cords that are not heavy enough to safely handle the current drawn through them to the appliance they are connected to.

PURCHASE ONLY UL-APPROVED EXTENSION CORDS THAT ARE CAPABLE OF HANDLING THE ELECTRICAL LOADS THEY ARE USED FOR.

3. Extension cords can also fray, crack and wear out, and when they do, they become fire and electrical shock hazards.

INSPECT THE CONDITION OF YOUR EXTENSION CORDS. IF ANY ARE DEFECTIVE, THROW THEM OUT! GET RID OF THEM!

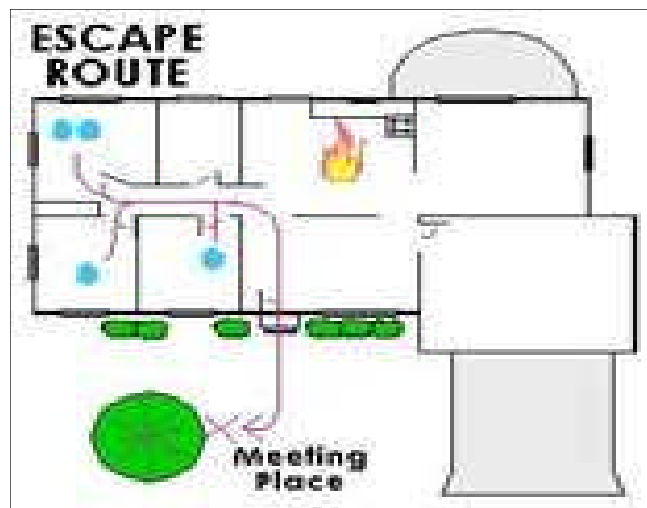
Have An Escape Plan.

If Fire Breaks Out In Your Home, Will You Be Able To Get Out In Time?

Having a smoke detector in your home cuts your risk of a home fire in half. But you can do even better than that. You can develop and practice a home escape plan and increase your chances of escaping from a fire without injury **EVEN MORE.**

Practicing how you would escape from a fire **BEFORE** it strikes will enable you to get out faster, with less panic. In a real fire, the smoke is thick and black - you can't see through it - and the toxic gases in it can confuse you.

BUT - if you've practiced how you would escape from your home, and you know two ways out of every room in your home, you will know the drill by heart and can get out quickly even after you've been exposed to disorienting smoke.



Other Steps You Can Take:

- * Check to make sure that no windows are painted or locked shut; that no furniture blocks any exit door; and that there are no deadbolt locks that are too difficult to open quickly. Locked doors and windows should be able to be unlocked quickly and easily so they can't trap you inside your home if you have a fire. Get any obstacles corrected **BEFORE** you have a fire. You won't have time to struggle with a stuck window or move heavy furniture to clear your escape path in a real emergency.
- * When practicing your escape plan, review how you would call 911 for emergency help from your cell phone.
- * Once outside, **STAY OUTSIDE, AND NEVER RETURN TO A BURNING BUILDING.**
- * As part of your escape plan, establish a meeting place outside where you and all other members of your family can wait for the fire department.



-Fire Safety Away From Home - **Fire Safety in Hotels, Theaters, Restaurants, Etc.**

Some Seniors stay home a lot, but others do not. Many of today's senior citizens are very much on the go - dining out, going to movie theaters and casinos, vacationing, traveling, staying in hotels, attending special events. There's just no keeping some of them at home. So the question is: *how do you make sure you're safe from fire while you're away from home?* And the answer to that question is: ***by applying the very same home fire safety principles to the places you are visiting away from home.***

* **When Making Hotel Reservations** - Ask if your room has smoke detectors and a sprinkler system. Hotels and motels with sprinkler systems are by far the safest places to stay in terms of fire safety. Try to book rooms **BELOW** the 4th Floor.

* **Prepare For Safety Before Leaving Home** - A small flashlight and a notebook with emergency phone numbers and addresses could be very helpful in an emergency. Emergency telephone numbers should be placed near the hotel's telephone, where they will be easy to locate in the event of an emergency. Some people take their own portable smoke alarm along with them, just in case.



Fire Safety Away From Home

* **Check the Exits** - In hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, casinos, and other places of entertainment, prepare yourself for a possible emergency by making a mental note of where the exits are and the best ways of getting to them. You should figure out a primary means of escape AND a secondary means of escape, in case your main escape route is blocked.

* **Fire Safety in a High Rise Building.** Although you Elevators in high rise buildings are frequently shut down in fire emergencies, which makes the evacuation of the elderly far more difficult. Smoke, fire and loss of electrical power can also make stairwells hazardous. So what should you do if you find that all the escape routes of a high rise building are blocked by smoke and/or fire? If this is the case, you should try to put distance and solid barriers between you and the fire, and then try to get help.

The best way of sheltering yourself from fire will depend upon the fire's exact nature, but in general, you should go to another room, maybe on another floor, and preferably to a room that has a door, a window, a balcony and a telephone. The room should also be located where firefighters will be able to reach you. Call for help if possible, but if the telephone is not operating, you may have to wave a towel or a bedsheet from a window or a balcony and call out to let others know your location. Then stay calm until help arrives.

REMEMBER FIRE CAN BE PREVENTED.

Review

This means preparing your home by making it safe from fire, and preparing yourself and members of your family in case you actually have a fire. By being prepared, you will be able to act quickly in an emergency.

REMEMBER FIRE CAN STRIKE ANYONE, AND FIRE CAN STRIKE ANYWHERE. No one is ever completely safe from the possibility of an accidental house fire. But by being prepared, you **GREATLY** reduce the chances of becoming a victim of fire.

Although this booklet will provide you with a solid foundation of fire safety, **NO BOOK OR BOOKLET CAN POSSIBLY PREPARE YOU FOR ALL THE WAYS IN WHICH FIRE CAN STRIKE.** People in high-rise buildings, for example, have different fire prevention requirements than people living in single homes, even though many of the basic principles may be the same. By becoming more aware of the many ways that fires can start, you become better prepared to deal with unexpected fire situations.

This brochure was created in the interest of New Jersey Seniors as a Fire Safety and Prevention resource by the New Jersey Division of Fire Safety and your local fire service.

www.state.nj.us/dca/dfs/

**PRESENTED AS A PUBLIC SERVICE BY THE
NEW JERSEY DIVISION OF FIRE SAFETY AND
YOUR LOCAL FIRE SERVICE**



**LAWRENCE PETRILLO
NEW JERSEY STATE FIRE MARSHAL**