

Special Report: **Four Preventable Tragedies**

Home Fires

Fires can lead to the total loss of the house and they are also the leading cause of accidental deaths in the home. Where there is fire damage there is usually smoke damage as well. Most residential fire deaths occur because of inhalation of toxic gas, rather than contact with the flames. The tragedy is that many of these deaths could be prevented by taking a few precautions. You should take steps to prevent home fires, make an escape plan for your household just in case, and be prepared to fight any fire that does occur. Start by taking these preventative steps:



House Fire

- Every home should have a smoke alarm with the batteries replaced as recommended by the manufacturer, usually twice a year.
- Keep all flammable chemicals like fertilizers and turpentine in their original containers and in a storage area separate from the house.
- When storing gasoline, use an approved container and keep it in an exterior shed. Do not ever bring gasoline indoors and only use it as motor fuel.
- Keep all flammable things away from your fireplace, and use a metal fireplace screen to keep sparks and embers inside it.
- Keep matches and lighters in a locked cabinet or drawer, inaccessible by children.
- Remain in or near the kitchen when you cook, to stay on watch for kitchen fires. Do not wear loose clothing that could catch fire while you lean over the stove.
- Items that can burn (like dishtowels, curtains, paper and plastic bags) should be kept three feet or more from the range top.
- Douse matches, cigarettes and cigar butts in water before throwing them

away in the trash.

Do not ever leave burning candles unattended and do not allow children to have candles or incense in their rooms. Stable holders for candles are a safety necessity.

Chimney fires can sometimes spread to other parts of the house. Inspect your chimneys, fireplaces, stoves and furnaces once a year and clean as necessary. A professional chimney sweep costs about \$100.

A clothes dryer frequently causes fires, often because of lint buildup in the duct venting to the outside. Clean ducts regularly, and/or replace plastic ducts with metal versions.

Never smoke in bed or overstuffed furniture, or leave a burning cigarette in an ashtray.

Keep matches and lighters out of the reach of children, and teach your children about the dangers of playing with fire.

Purchase smoke alarms for each floor of your home.

Clear surrounding brush to protect your home against wildfires or fire spreading from a nearby house.

Make sure your address is clearly visible from the street, so emergency responders can find your home easily.

As a final safeguard against small fires or to keep a small fire from developing into a big one, every home should be equipped with at least one fire extinguisher. A typical fire extinguisher for the home or office should have an "ABC" rating. Keep it at close to full charge (this should be viewable on its gauge). When using one, point it at the *base* of the flames to extinguish the source of the fire.

Electrical Fires

Don't let this often-overlooked danger jump up and bite you! Simply take the following precautions:

Do not load too many appliances onto one power outlet. Older homes especially may need an upgrade to better wiring and/or more circuits to supply today's power-hungry homes.

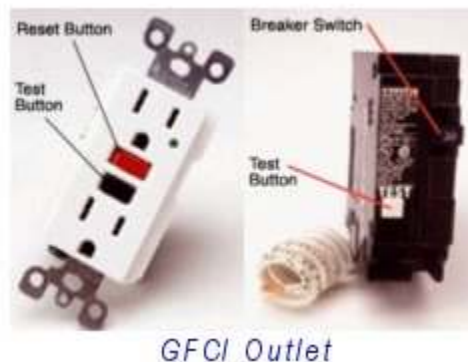
Do not use damaged or frayed electrical cords or extension cords. Never use *any* extension cord with heating or air conditioning equipment because that can cause an overload.

If any interior lights dim when you activate a major appliance (or when it turns on automatically, e.g. a refrigerator), this may mean you have bad wiring or too many appliances connected to one circuit.

Flickering lights can be an indication of failing connections in aluminum wiring, a component in homes constructed between 1965 and 1973.

Unusually warm outlets or switches may indicate that an unsafe wiring condition exists. Have an electrician check the wiring as soon as possible.

Ground-fault circuit interrupters (GFCI) can prevent deadly shocks. Outlets in bathrooms (and in kitchens within six feet of the sink) should be GFCI. You know you already have them if your outlets have red and/or black buttons.



Your Escape Plan

Develop an emergency exit plan and an alternate exit plan using the following suggestions:

The most obvious way out may be blocked by fire. A window will usually be the second way out of a bedroom. Make sure that screens or storm windows can be easily removed. You may want to get an escape ladder (or a thick knotted rope) for each occupied bedroom.

In the event of fire, do not stop to get dressed or gather valuables. Seconds count - regrettably, you can't afford to search for the family pet.

Stay low to the floor on your hands and knees to avoid smoke and intense heat, which tends to drift upward.

If a door feels warm, open it slowly, and close it quickly if heat or smoke rushes in.

Have a pre-agreed meeting place so everyone knows where to go.

Once you're out, never re-enter the home while there is any fire. As soon as two people have safely escaped, one should call 911 from a neighbor's house or cell phone, while the other looks out for the other household members.

After the fire has subsided, do not enter the home until the fire department says you can. Even though the fire has been extinguished, it can still rekindle. If your home is not destroyed, take all necessary precautions to protect it: board up windows and doors to protect it from looters, and tarp or shrink-wrap the roof to prevent rain damage. Assess all damage promptly to ensure proper insurance compensation. Avoid using electronic appliances until cleaned and checked (empty the refrigerator and freezer while not powered up). Close doors to burned areas to contain smoke odors, while opening windows to ventilate.

Home Accidents

Falls

Accidental falls are a more common cause of death in the home than fires, especially for elderly people. To safeguard against this tragedy, use these protective measures:

Install grab bars in all bathrooms and shower stalls. Firmly anchor them into the wall studs with long screws and follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully.

Use a non-slip mat, or install strips or decals in bathtubs and showers to help prevent slipping.

To provide sufficient lighting, use night-lights near bathrooms, bedrooms and stairwells. Make sure stairwells and hallways are always well lit – especially at night. Provide sufficient lighting to all walkways and entrances to the home.

Keep your floors clear of anything that may cause tripping. Pick up hazards such as toys, shoes and magazines.

Don't use chairs or tables as makeshift ladders. Many people are seriously hurt when they lose their footing.

Teach your children not to run indoors or jump down stairs.



Grab Bar Installation

Poisoning

Poisoning is one of the most frequent causes of death in the home, most often resulting from incorrect dosages of drugs (whether legal or illegal). Know what to do:

Signs of poisoning can include sudden illness, unusual sleepiness, eyes going around in circles, vomiting or other strange behaviors. You may detect burns or stains around the lips or mouth, strange smells - especially on the breath, and opened or spilled medicines, alcohol, or cleaning products.

If you think the poison was a cleaning or decorating product, follow the first-aid steps on the label. Then call the Poison Control or your doctor.

Every Poison Control Center in the country can be reached by calling the

AAPCC* nationwide hotline, 1-800-222-1222. Post this number, along with your other emergency numbers, by your phone. Experts will answer your call, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Always check with Poison Control or your doctor before giving your child anything if they have been poisoned.

When you call Poison Control or your doctor, tell them: your child's age, height, and weight, any health problems your child has, what the poison was, how it was taken (e.g. swallowed, breathed in, splashed on the eyes), and whether your child has vomited. If you are told to make a child vomit, give either (but not both): syrup of ipecac as instructed to encourage vomiting, or activated charcoal which inhibits the spread of the poison through the body.

Make sure all medications, caustic cleaning products (example: drain openers, toilet and oven cleaners, detergents, rust removers, etc.), automotive fluids (example: windshield washing solution and antifreeze), pesticides, alcohol (drinking or rubbing), medicines, vitamin pills, makeup, mouthwash, first aid supplies, deodorants, perfumes, cigarettes, liquor, furniture polish, lamp oil, some plants, anti-freeze, fuel, car polishes, paints, paint removers, mothballs, bug spray, road salt, fertilizer and other household chemicals are in their original containers and in a locked cabinet.



Poison Sticker

If you have children, insist on child-resistant packaging. Close caps tightly after using medicines and household products. Lock medicines and household products up high so children can't see or reach them. Put poison warning stickers on products (you can buy them in the home improvement aisle of department stores) and teach your children what they mean.

Before taking multiple medications, make sure the pharmacist says that mixing them in your bloodstream will not be harmful.

Drownings

Observe the following precautions when near water:

Keep watch on all youngsters who go near the water, especially when they have inflatable water toys (they might try to go too far.)

Don't do unsafe things like swimming alone, walking on ice, swimming in cold water, ignoring strong currents or rough seas, or swimming soon after a meal (or after drinking).

When boating remember to get the weather report before going out, wear lifejackets, have at least one radio, and don't get stranded out at sea.

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