

Fire Prevention Week 2008: "Prevent Home Fires!"

Your home should be a safe haven. But do you regularly check for home fire hazards? If not, there is the potential for danger. Fire departments responded to nearly 400,000 home fires in 2006. That's why the theme of Fire Prevention Week 2008 is "It's Fire Prevention Week: Prevent Home Fires!"

With a little extra caution, preventing the leading causes of home fires – cooking, heating, electrical and smoking-materials – is within our power.

Facts about Fire

Cooking

- Cooking fires are the #1 cause of home fires and home fire injuries.
- In 2005, cooking equipment was involved in 146,400 reported home structure fires, the largest share for any major cause. These fires resulted in 480 civilian deaths, 4,690 civilian injuries, and \$876 million in direct property damage.
- The majority of home fires – 40% – start in the kitchen.
- Unattended cooking is the leading factor contributing to ignition in home cooking fires, accounting for one-third of such fires. More than half of all cooking fire injuries occurred when people tried to fight the fire themselves.
- Most home cooking fires (67%) in 2005 started with the range or stove.
- Electric ranges or stoves have a higher risk of fires, deaths, injuries and property damage, compared to gas ranges or stoves.

Electrical

- Electrical distribution and lighting equipment were involved in an estimated 20,900 reported home fires in 2005. These fires resulted in 500 civilian deaths and 1,100 injuries, with an estimated \$862 million in direct property damage per year.
- Lamps, light fixtures, and light bulbs accounted for the largest share of 2002-2005 non-confined fires among major types of electrical distribution equipment, while cords and plugs accounted for the largest share of civilian fire deaths.

- Extension cord fires outnumbered fires beginning with attached or unattached power cords by more than two-to-one.
- Cords and plugs were involved in one-eighth (12%) of the 2002-2005 home electrical distribution and lighting equipment fires, but roughly two-fifths (39%) of associated civilian deaths.

Smoking materials

- Smoking materials (i.e., cigarettes, cigars, pipes, etc.) are the leading cause of fire deaths in the United States. Roughly one of every four fire deaths per year in 2002-2005 was attributed to smoking materials.
- In 2002-2005, there were an estimated 82,400 smoking-material fires per year in the United States. These fires caused 800 civilian deaths and 1,660 civilian injuries.
- Older adults are at the highest risk of death or injury from smoking-material fires even though they are less likely to smoke than younger adults.
- The most common material first ignited in home smoking-material fire deaths were mattresses and bedding and upholstered furniture.
- In Canada, there were 7,700 fires in 2002 associated with smoking materials. These fires caused 140 civilian deaths, 470 civilian injuries and direct property damage of \$132 million Canadian (\$84 million U.S.).

Candles

- During 2005, an estimated 15,600 home structure fires started by candles were reported to local fire departments. These fires resulted in an estimated 150 civilian deaths, 1,270 civilian injuries and an estimated direct property loss of \$539 million. Homes include dwellings, duplexes, manufactured housing and apartments.
- Although home candle fires fell 8% from 2004 to 2005, more than twice as many were reported in 2005 as in 1990.
- Candle fires accounted for an estimated 4% of all reported home fires in 2005.
- The top five days for home candle fires were Christmas, Christmas Eve, New Year's Day, New Year's Eve, and Halloween.

Home fires

- In 2006, there were an estimated 396,000 reported home structure fires resulting in 2,580 civilian deaths and 12,500 civilian injuries and \$6.8 billion in direct damage in the United States .Home fires caused 80% of civilian deaths and 76% of injuries.
- Heating equipment and smoking are the leading causes of civilian home fire deaths.
- January and December were the peak months for home fires and home fire deaths.
- More than half of all home fire deaths result from incidents reported between 11:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m., but only 20% of home fires occur between these hours.
- Children under 5 and older adults face the highest risk of home fire death, but young adults face a higher risk of home fire injury.

Heating

- Heating fires are the second-leading cause of home fires.
- In 2005, heating equipment was involved in 62,200 reported U.S. home structure fires, with associated losses of 670 civilian deaths, 1,550 civilian injuries, and \$909 million in direct property damage.
- Nearly half (44%) of all home heating fires occurred in December, January and February in 2002-2005.
- Heating equipment fires accounted for 16% of all reported home fires in 2005 (second behind cooking) and 22% of home fire deaths.
- Space heaters, excluding fireplaces, chimneys, and chimney connectors, were involved in one-third (32%) of the home heating fires but three-fourths (73%) of the deaths in 2005.
- Between 2002-2005, the leading factor contributing to home heating fires (27%) and deaths (53%) was heating equipment too close to things that can burn, such as upholstered furniture, clothing, mattress, or bedding. This excludes fires reported as confined fires.

Smoke alarms

- Working smoke alarms cut the risk of dying in reported home structure fires in half.
- A 2004 U.S. telephone survey found that 96% of U.S. households had at least one smoke alarm, yet in 2000-2004, no smoke alarms were present or none operated in almost half (46%) of the reported home fires.

- An estimated 890 lives could be saved each year if all homes had working smoke alarms.
- 65% of reported home fire deaths in 2000-2004 resulted from fires in homes with no smoke alarms or no working smoke alarms.
- The fire death rate in homes with working smoke alarms is 51% less than the rate for homes without this protection.
- In one out of every five homes equipped with at least one smoke alarm installed, not a single one was working.
- When smoke alarms fail it is most often because of missing, disconnected or dead batteries. Nuisance activations were the leading cause of disabled smoke alarms.

Home escape planning

According to a [2004 NFPA survey](#) only 66% of Americans have actually developed a home fire escape plan to ensure they could escape quickly and safely. Of these, only about one third (35%) have practiced their plans.

- More than one out of every four American households who made an estimate thought they would have at least 6 minutes before a fire in their home would become life-threatening. The time available is often less.
- People under the age of 34 are less likely than those who are older to have escape plans.

Home fire sprinklers

- When sprinklers are present, the chances of dying in a fire are reduced by more than one-half and the average property loss per fire is cut by one-third to two-thirds, compared to fires where sprinklers are not present.
- There is approximately a two-thirds reduction in death rate per thousand fires if sprinklers are added to dwellings.
- NFPA has no record of a fire killing three or more people in a completely sprinklered building where the system was properly operating, except in an explosion or flash fire or where civilians or firefighters were killed while engaged in fire suppression operations.

Safety Information for Adults

Cooking with Care

- Stay in the kitchen when you are frying, grilling, or broiling food. If you leave the kitchen for even a short period time, turn off the stove.
- Keep anything that can catch fire – potholders, oven mitts, wooden utensils, paper or plastic bags – away from your stovetop.
- Wear short, close fitting or tightly rolled sleeves when cooking. Loose clothing can dangle onto stove burners and catch fire.
- Always keep an oven mitt and lid handy. If a small fire starts in a pan on the stove, put on the oven mitt and smother the flames by carefully sliding the lid over the pan. Turn off the burner. Don't remove the lid until it is completely cool.

Everyday Electrical Safety

- Keep lamps, light fixtures, and light bulbs away from anything that can burn, such as lamp shades, bedding, curtains, and clothing.
- Replace cracked and damaged electrical cords.
- Use extension cords for temporary wiring only. Consider having additional circuits or receptacles added by a qualified electrician.
- Homes with young children should have tamper-resistant electrical receptacles.
- Call a qualified electrician or landlord if you have recurring problems with blowing fuses or tripping circuit breakers, discolored or warm wall outlets, flickering lights or a burning or rubbery smell coming from an appliance.

Healthy Heating

- Install and maintain carbon monoxide alarms to avoid risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.
- Maintain heating equipment and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected every year by a qualified professional.
- Keep all things that can burn, such as paper, bedding or furniture, at least 3 feet away from heating equipment.
- Turn portable space heaters off when you go to bed or leave the room.
- An oven should not be used to heat a home.

Strike Out Smoking-materials Fires

- If you smoke, choose fire-safe cigarettes if they are available in your area.
- If you smoke, smoke outside.

- Wherever you smoke, use deep, sturdy ashtrays.
- Never smoke in a home where oxygen is used.
- Keep matches and lighters up high in a locked cabinet, out of the reach of children.

Candle with Caution

- Keep candles at least 12 inches from anything that can burn.
- Use sturdy, safe candleholders.
- Never leave a burning candle unattended. Blow out candles when you leave a room.
- Avoid using candles in bedrooms and sleeping areas.
- Use flashlights for emergency lighting.

Safety Information for Older Adults

Knowing what to do in the event of a fire is particularly important for older adults. At age 65, people are twice as likely to be killed or injured by fires compared to the population at large. And with our numbers growing every year - in the United States and Canada, adults age 65 and older make up about 12 percent of the population - it's essential to take the necessary steps to stay safe.

Safety tips

To increase fire safety for older adults, NFPA offers the following guidelines:

- **Keep it low**
If you don't live in an apartment building, consider sleeping in a room on the ground floor in order to make emergency escape easier. Make sure that [smoke alarms](#) are installed in every sleeping room and outside any sleeping areas. Have a telephone installed where you sleep in case of emergency. When looking for an apartment or high-rise home, look for one with an [automatic sprinkler system](#). Sprinklers can extinguish a home fire in less time that it takes for the fire department to arrive.
- **Sound the alarm**
The majority of fatal fires occur when people are sleeping, and

because smoke can put you into a deeper sleep rather than waking you, it is important to have a mechanical early warning of a fire to ensure that you wake up. If anyone in your household is deaf or if your own hearing is diminished, consider installing a smoke alarm that uses a flashing light or vibration to alert you to a fire emergency. [Contact NFPA's Center for High-Risk Outreach](#) for a list of product manufacturers.

- **Do the drill**

Conduct your own, or participate in, regular fire drills to make sure you know what to do in the event of a home fire. If you or someone you live with cannot escape alone, designate a member of the household to assist, and decide on backups in case the designee isn't home. Fire drills are also a good opportunity to make sure that everyone is able to hear and respond to smoke alarms.

- **Open up**

Make sure that you are able to open all doors and windows in your home. Locks and pins should open easily from inside. (Some [apartment and high-rise buildings](#) have windows designed not to open.) If you have [security bars on doors or windows](#), they should have emergency release devices inside so that they can be opened easily. These devices won't compromise your safety, but they will enable you to open the window from inside in the event of a fire. Check to be sure that windows haven't been sealed shut with paint or nailed shut; if they have, arrange for someone to break the seals all around your home or remove the nails.

- **Stay connected**

Keep a telephone nearby, along with emergency phone numbers so that you can communicate with emergency personnel if you're trapped in your room by fire or smoke.

The History of Fire Prevention Week

Commemorating a conflagration

Fire Prevention Week was established to commemorate the Great Chicago Fire, the tragic 1871 conflagration that killed more than 250 people, left 100,000 homeless, destroyed more than 17,400 structures and burned more than 2,000 acres. The fire began on October 8, but continued into and did most of its damage on October 9, 1871.

According to popular legend, the fire broke out after a cow - belonging to Mrs. Catherine O'Leary - kicked over a lamp, setting first the barn, then the whole city on fire. Chances are you've heard some version of this story yourself; people have been blaming the Great Chicago Fire on the cow and Mrs. O'Leary, for more than 130 years. But recent research by Chicago historian Robert Cromie has helped to debunk this version of events.

The 'Moo' myth

Like any good story, the 'case of the cow' has some truth to it. The great fire almost certainly started near the barn where Mrs. O'Leary kept her five milking cows. But there is no proof that O'Leary was in the barn when the fire broke out - or that a jumpy cow sparked the blaze. Mrs. O'Leary herself swore that she'd been in bed early that night, and that the cows were also tucked in for the evening.

But if a cow wasn't to blame for the huge fire, what was? Over the years, journalists and historians have offered plenty of theories. Some blamed the blaze on a couple of neighborhood boys who were near the barn sneaking cigarettes. Others believed that a neighbor of the O'Leary's may have started the fire. Some people have speculated that a fiery meteorite may have fallen to earth on October 8, starting several fires that day - in Michigan and Wisconsin, as well as in Chicago.

The biggest blaze that week

While the Great Chicago Fire was the best-known blaze to start during this fiery two-day stretch, it wasn't the biggest. That distinction goes to the Peshtigo Fire, the most devastating forest fire in American history. The fire, which also occurred on October 8th, 1871, and roared through Northeast Wisconsin, burning down 16 towns, killing 1,152 people, and scorching 1.2 million acres before it ended.

Historical accounts of the fire say that the blaze began when several railroad workers clearing land for tracks unintentionally started a brush fire. Before long, the fast-moving flames were whipping through the area 'like a tornado,' some survivors said. It was the small town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin that suffered the worst damage. Within an hour, the entire town had been destroyed.

Eight decades of fire prevention

Those who survived the Chicago and Peshtigo fires never forgot what they'd

been through; both blazes produced countless tales of bravery and heroism. But the fires also changed the way that firefighters and public officials thought about fire safety. On the 40th anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire, the Fire Marshals Association of North America (today known as the [International Fire Marshals Association](#)), decided that the anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire should henceforth be observed not with festivities, but in a way that would keep the public informed about the importance of fire prevention. The commemoration grew incrementally official over the years.

In 1920, President Woodrow Wilson issued the first National Fire Prevention Day proclamation, and since 1922, Fire Prevention Week has been observed on the Sunday through Saturday period in which October 9 falls. According to the National Archives and Records Administration's Library Information Center, Fire Prevention Week is the longest running public health and safety observance on record. The President of the United States has signed a proclamation proclaiming a national observance during that week every year since 1925.

Fire Prevention Week themes over the years

1957 Don't Give Fire a Place to Start

1958 Don't Give Fire a Place to Start

1959 Fire Prevention is Your Job... Too

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1963 Don't Give Fire a Place to Start

1964 Fire Prevention is Your Job... Too

1965 Don't Give Fire a Place to Start

1966 Fight Fire

1967 Fire Hurts

1968 Fire Hurts

1969 Fire Hurts

1970 Fire Hurts

1971 Fire Hurts

1972 Fire Hurts

1973 Help Stop Fire

1974 Things That Burn

1975 Learn Not to Burn

1976 Learn Not to Burn

1977 Where There's Smoke, There Should Be a Smoke Alarm

1978 You Are Not Alone!
1979 Partners in Fire Prevention
1980 Partners in Fire Prevention
1981 EDITH (Exit Drills In The Home)
1982 Learn Not To Burn - Wherever You Are
1983 Learn Not To Burn All Through the Year
1984 Join the Fire Prevention Team
1985 Fire Drills Save Lives at Home at School at Work
1986 Learn Not to Burn: It Really Works!
1987 Play It Safe...Plan Your Escape
1988 A Sound You Can Live With: Test Your Smoke Detector
1989 Big Fires Start Small: Keep Matches and Lighters in the Right Hands
1990 Keep Your Place Firesafe: Hunt for Home Hazards
1991 Fire Won't Wait...Plan Your Escape.
1992 Test Your Detector - It's Sound Advice!
1993 Get Out, Stay Out: Your Fire Safe Response
1994 Test Your Detector For Life
1995 Watch What You Heat: Prevent Home Fires!
1996 Let's Hear It For Fire Safety: Test Your Detectors!
1997 Know When to Go: React Fast to Fire
1998 Fire Drills: The Great Escape!
1999 Fire Drills: The Great Escape!
2000 Fire Drills: The Great Escape!
2001 Cover the Bases & Strike Out Fire
2002 Team Up for Fire Safety
2003 When Fire Strikes: Get Out! Stay Out!
2004 It's Fire Prevention Week! Test Your Smoke Alarms
2005 Use Candles With Care
2006 Prevent Cooking Fires: Watch What You Heat
2007 It's Fire Prevention Week! Practice Your Escape Plan
2008 It's Fire Prevention Week! Prevent Home Fires

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