

ALCOHOL AND SMOKING — A HIGH-RISK MIXTURE

Minnesota State Fire Marshal's Office and the Spring Lake Park-Blaine-Mounds View Fire Department

Smoking-related fires cause hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries and millions of dollars in property loss in our nation each year. Combining the use of alcohol or other drugs with smoking increases the chance of starting a fire while it decreases the chance of detecting, mitigating and escaping the fire.

Studies by the U.S. Fire Administration show that more than half of alcohol-impaired fire deaths result from fires caused by careless smoking. In Minnesota, careless smoking accounts for 34 percent of residential fire deaths.

Minnesota requires autopsies on all fire fatalities. In a study conducted from 1993 to 1996, there were 255 deaths caused by fire; out of these, 30 percent were found to have positive blood alcohol concentrations. Among this group, 64 percent of the fires were smoking-related.

All of us must be conscious of the fire hazards related to the use of alcohol and tobacco. Establish, follow, and enforce a set of rules that will protect everyone in your home.

- *Careless disposal of smoking materials is the leading cause of fatal residential fires in the United States. Nearly 2,000 people die every year in fires caused by careless disposal of still-burning cigarettes and other smoking materials, and 250,000 houses burn because someone didn't handle these materials properly.*
- Large, deep ashtrays are the safest kind to use because there is less risk of a cigarette falling out and starting a fire. Even when a cigarette appears to be extinguished, there is still a chance that it may be smoldering. When you empty an ashtray, empty it into a coffee can and put the airtight lid back on. After 24 hours you can safely dump the can into the trash.
- Before you leave a room where people have been smoking, carefully check under cushions and furniture. Check for embers, cigarette butts or matches. Make sure they have not been smoldering and remove anything you find.
- Never smoke in bed. Even people who don't feel tired can doze off. If you think you'll wake up if the bed catches fire, you're **DEAD** wrong. The toxic gases from your bedding burning will put you into a deep sleep — maybe even an eternal sleep.
- Protect vulnerable smokers. Keep a watchful eye on elderly and disabled smokers; make sure they follow safety precautions.
- Ignition devices are for adults. Store matches and cigarette lighters up high where children can't reach them. Teach children to give matches or lighters they find to adults.
- Install smoke alarms on every level of your home, and outside each sleeping area. Plan and practice home escape drills. Keep in mind that smoke alarms may not wake young children. Be sure you can reach your children in the event of a fire.

Using alcohol and smoking materials in your home, a dangerous smoking-related fire could happen to you — and the price could be much higher than your home and possessions, because these are the deadliest fires of all.

