

Fire Safe Cigarettes: What You Need to Know

By Rebecca Booker

Spring Lake Park-Blaine-Mounds View Fire Department

If you were told there was something that could make an impact or prevent 29% of the nation's fire deaths (one third being children), \$6 billion in societal costs and direct property damage, and 2,500 injuries, would you be interested? Well, there truly is something. It is called a fire-safe cigarette. Cigarettes are designed to continue burning when left unattended. Cigarettes vary in their potential to start fires, depending on cigarette design and content. The term "fire-safe" is defined as a cigarette with reduced propensity for starting a fire when dropped or left unattended. The technology needed to produce fire-safe cigarettes has been available for over a decade.

Facts on smoking material fires:

- In home fires, smoking materials mostly ignite trash, mattresses and bedding, and upholstered furniture.
- Smoking-related home fires peak in frequency in late afternoon and early evening. Fires peak during the hours when family members are coming home from their day's activities, but associated civilian fire deaths peak in the early morning, which suggests a long smoldering period for unnoticed, discarded cigarettes, which erupt into flames when one is awake to discover them.
- Smoking-related home fires and deaths peak during colder months, when people spend proportionally more time indoors and smokers may do much more of their smoking indoors.

In the seventies, efforts to reduce smoking-material fires were focused on *pre-ignition* modification of items most frequently ignited - mattresses and upholstered furniture. These new products were designed using materials more resistive to cigarette ignitions. Although these products are more resistant to ignition by smoking materials, some may burn faster, more intensely or produce more toxic smoke once ignited.

In the eighties, efforts shifted from the materials being ignited to the smoking material *itself-ignition modification*. These efforts resulted in the Cigarette Safety Act of 1984. This established groups to conduct studies on the feasibility of developing cigarettes and little cigars that would be less likely to start fires. In 1987, it was reported that it was technically feasible to develop a cigarette with less of a propensity to ignite other items. This and the results of other continued efforts, led to the Fire Safe Cigarette Act of 1990.

Since these acts, New York and Vermont passed laws requiring fire-safe cigarettes. Just recently, California enacted similar legislation, and Canada, adopted a law that, as of October 1, 2005, requiring only fire-safe cigarettes be manufactured, imported, or exported.

Information coming from the New York fire-safe cigarettes experience is still being compiled. It could take years to achieve clear results of how the law has affected fire deaths, injuries or property loss. But the tax receipts from cigarette sales in New York

increased in the year after the law took effect, refuting claims by opponents that this would alter the taste or smoking experience of the cigarette by the public. According to a September 21, 2005 Associated Press report, “Fewer people have died in smoking-related fires since New York last year became the first state to require that tobacco companies sell self-extinguishing cigarettes.”

The potential of *post-ignition* strategies are limited by the unusually high percentage of smoking-material fire deaths involving drug or alcohol impairment, limitations because of age, physical or mental disabilities. Also, a significant number of smoking fire deaths involve victims in the same room as the room of fire origin. Victims who are close to the fire or unable to respond effectively are difficult to save by strategies which operate after the fire has begun.

Until fire-safe cigarettes become the standard, we must practice the principles of prevention that can make a difference now:

- Use large, deep ashtrays that hold the cigarette in the center rather than on the side.
- Smoke only when fully alert, and in a standing or sitting position. Recognize that alcohol and some medications can cause drowsiness. Avoid smoking when under the influence of either.
- If children are in the home, make sure matches and lighters are not only out of sight, but locked up. Keep ahead of their natural curiosity; teach them matches and lighters are tools, not toys.
- Dispose ashes and butts in a metal can with a metal lid. Add water to the can. They can smolder for long periods.
- If you have smoking guests over, check the couches and chairs for any leftover smoldering materials.
- Have a working smoke alarm in every bedroom, halls outside the bedrooms and on every level. Sleep with your bedroom door closed and consider residential sprinklers in your home.

According to the President of the NFPA (National Fire Protection Association), “This movement toward fire-safe cigarettes is a tremendous step forward in fire safety, but its full benefit will only be achieved when such cigarettes are the standard everywhere.