

# Seniors at Risk

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Fire can happen to anyone and at anytime. Yet those most at risk at dying in a fire are Americans over the age of 65, according to the United States Fire Administration.

- People between 65 and 74 are nearly TWICE as likely to die in a fire.
- People between 75 and 84 are nearly FOUR times as likely to die in a fire.
- People ages 85 and older are more than FIVE times as likely to die in a fire.

**Why are they more at risk?** When we get older our responses needed for quick action are lessened. This can be especially dangerous in an emergency like a fire. Impairments such as hearing loss, visual problems or issues with mobility can affect how we react. Because of this, problems associated with the use of medications also potentially become a risk factor. If a senior lives alone, there might not be someone around to help when an emergency occurs.

## **Patterns in High Risk Activities:**

- 39% percent of older adults who were killed in residential structure fires were asleep at the time of the fire.
- 32% percent were trying to escape when they died.
- 8% percent were attempting to control the fire.

**The Goals:** Practice fire-safe behaviors when cooking, smoking and heating. Maintain smoke alarms, develop and practice a fire escape plan, and consider residential sprinklers.

*Cooking Safety-* Many families gather in the kitchen to spend time together, but it can be one of the most hazardous rooms in the house if you don't practice safe cooking behaviors. Cooking is the leading cause of injury among people ages 65 and older and the 3<sup>rd</sup> cause of fire death. Serious injury or even death can happen when wearing loose clothing (especially hanging sleeves), walking away from a cooking pot on the stove, or leaving combustible materials, such as potholders or papers near the burners. When in the kitchen, consider:

- Always attending your cooking.
- Make a concentrated effort to wear short or tight-fitting sleeves when you cook. Keep papers, towels, potholders away from flames.
- When trying to keep your home warm, don't supplement heat with the range or stove.
- Take a backwards glance at the kitchen before you retire to make sure all is well.

*Smoking Safety-* Sitting down to relax and have a cigarette seems to many a good way to relax, yet smoking and relaxing can be a deadly mixture. Falling asleep while smoking can ignite clothing, rugs and other materials used in upholstered furniture. Using alcohol and medications that make you sleepy compound this hazard. Careless smoking is the leading cause of fire deaths and the second leading cause of fire injuries among people ages 65 and older. Cigarettes, when not properly extinguished, continue to burn. When a resting cigarette is accidentally knocked over, it can smolder for long periods of time before a flare-up occurs. Before you light up, consider:

- Extinguishing your cigarette or cigar in a metal can and lid. Add water to the can.
- Using deep ashtrays.

- Never smoking in bed or around concentrated materials such as bedding, couches or chairs.
- Always attending your smoking materials.
- After company leaves, checking the couches and chairs for smoldering smoking materials.

*Heating Safety-* During the winter months of January and February, there are more home fires than any other time of year. Fireplaces, wood stoves, and heating devices like space heaters make our homes more comfortably warm, but should always be used with added care. Heating is the second leading cause of fire death and the third leading cause of injury to people ages 65 and older. Before you get too comfortable, consider:

- Making sure your chimney gets cleaned and inspected in a timely manner.
- Only using hardwoods in the fireplace, never garbage.
- Keeping three feet clearance of combustibles around the fireplace, wood stove or space heater.
- When buying a space heater, look for a control feature that automatically shuts off the power if the heater falls over. Do not use space heaters in the bathroom or other wet areas.

**Maintaining for Fire Safety-** Like anything else in our homes, we must take steps to maintain our safety and ensure getting out alive from a fire situation. Consider these steps:

- Install smoke alarms in your bedrooms, in the halls outside the bedrooms and on every level of your home. Install new ones if they are over 10 years old. Change the batteries every 6 months.
- Develop a safe escape plan. Know two ways out of every room, including the second floor, if you have one. If you sleep on the second floor or higher, consider a fire ladder which is often less than \$50.
- Have a family meeting place that you have all discussed and agreed upon. It needs to be in front of your residence where you can be seen by emergency personnel.
- Consider sleeping with your bedroom doors closed at night, as they act as temporary fire barriers.
- Practice your plan twice a year. Practice helps to make it a habit and allows you to find things in need of change to make your plan workable.
- When living alone, involve family, friends and neighbors with your plan.
- Getting residential sprinklers in your home installed. Homes can be retrofitted with sprinklers. If a home has both residential sprinklers and smoke alarms, there is a 90 – 99% chance of getting out alive from any fire situation. The Spring Lake Park-Blaine-Mounds View Fire Department offers 0% loans to assist you.

A few examples of fires that have involved older adults reported to FEMA:

- May 2005: Fire investigators in Clarksville, Tennessee, are still working to find the cause of a fire that killed an elderly couple early on a Sunday morning. A 78-year old man and his 63-year-old wife apparently died while trying to put out the flames.
- February 2005: In Luna Pier, Michigan, a second-story fire at a senior citizen's apartment building took the life of a 67- year-old woman and left 30 other older

adults homeless. The woman, who was attending a tenant meeting elsewhere in the building when the fire struck, returned to her apartment where a cigarette had been left unattended on a couch.

- December 2004: A Christmas Eve fire resulted in the death of an 80-year-old man after his clothing caught on fire while working near a fireplace in his Atherton, California, home. His 79-year old wife was critically injured.
- August 2004: An 86-year old senior died shortly after being rescued from his burning home in Mount Olive, North Carolina. The fire started when his son lit a cigarette in the next room, where a LP gas torch was located.

*Fires are predictable and preventable at any age. Making simple adjustments in our behaviors can dramatically reduce the elevated risks from fire injury or death that our seniors face.*