

# Fire Safety Tips

## LET'S RETIRE FIRE

## For Older Americans



Federal Emergency Management Agency

United States Fire Administration

# Fire Safety Tips for Older Americans

## Smoke Detectors

**1.** Smoke detectors provide valuable home protection. Detectors **double your chances of surviving** a fire in your home by **providing early warning** and valuable extra time for escape. Install smoke detectors and maintain them.

**2.** If you cannot install a detector yourself, ask a relative, a friend, or a neighbor or call the Fire Department. They will help you locate **the best spot for the detector** and make sure that the detector is installed.

**3.** At a minimum, you should have a detector immediately **outside your sleeping area**. The ideal spot is on the ceiling or high on the wall, out of corners where “dead air” space might not capture rising smoke and gases. Detectors also should be placed at the **top of open**

**stairways** (or at the bottom of enclosed stairways). There should be a detector on **every level of your home** or apartment.

**4.** **Do not disable your detectors** by removing batteries or disconnecting wires. Doing so could mean the difference between life and death.

**5.** If your detector goes off because of cooking fumes or steam from the bathroom, **consult your fire department** about whether to move it or if you need a different type of detector.

**6.** **Clean the detectors** periodically to keep them free from dust and dirt. **Test the batteries.** Detectors connected to your house wiring should be tested regularly, too. Use a broom handle to tap the button or test by lighting and blowing out a match so that the smoke circulates by the detector. If you cannot physically clean and test the detectors, ask someone to do it for you. Don't neglect this important task.

**7.** Smoke detector **batteries must be changed** at least once a year. Use your birthday or some other major holiday as your annual “Battery Replacement Day.”

**8.** **If your landlord or building manager is responsible** for smoke detectors where you live, call and ask when they last were tested, cleaned or replaced. If the detectors have not been attended to, insist that the party responsible act immediately. If they do not respond, call the Fire Department, your local Area Agency on Aging, the Mayors Office, or the Housing Authority. Smoke detectors are important protection in escaping fire – you must have a smoke detector. Don't live without one!

## Kitchen Fires

**1.** **The kitchen is a high danger zone** for fire, so be extra cautious with flame when cooking in the kitchen.

**2.** **If you must leave the kitchen** while you are cooking, **turn off the burners.** If you have something in the oven, check it every 15 minutes or so. Most kitchen fires occur because food is left unattended on the stove or in the oven. A “brief” departure from the kitchen to attend to other matters can easily turn into an extended time away. **As a reminder to you, take a potholder, a cooking spoon, or other kitchen utensil with you when you leave the room.** The object will help you remember that you have an unfinished task waiting in the kitchen.

**3.** Never cook with loose, dangling sleeves. Robes and other **loose-fitting garments can ignite easily.** This is a major cause of serious burns for senior citizens. Don't take chances!

**4.** Place a **rubber mat** in front of the stove. The mat will give you traction if liquids or grease spill around the stove.

**5.** Clean **grease** from cooking surfaces regularly so that it does not accumulate. Grease is extremely flammable.

**6.** Do not use **small pans on large burners**. The flames or heat comes up and around them and ignites things – or you!

**7.** To avoid burns from spattering grease, **heat oils gradually**. Use extra caution when preparing deep-fried food.

**8.** Turn pot handles toward the side of the range, and **always use a potholder** when reaching for handles.

**9.** Never use the **range or oven to heat your home**. This is a very dangerous practice.

**10.** **Double-check the kitchen** before you go to bed. Are the stove and oven turned off? Is the electric coffee pot unplugged? How about the toaster oven or the crock pot? Be sure!

**11.** Turn off the burner before you remove a pot or pan.

**12.** If a fire breaks out in a pan while cooking, **put a lid on the pan**. You may be able to smother a small fire with baking soda or a home fire extinguisher. Do not use flour to put out a fire – it can explode. And never throw water on a grease fire. Get out and call the Fire Department immediately.

### Treating Burns and Scalds or Clothes on Fire

**1.** To help prevent scalds, **turn down the hot water heater** to 120 degrees.

**2.** When turning on water to bathe or cook, **first turn the spigots to cold**, then gradually increase the amount of hot water.

**3.** Always test bath water before getting into the tub or shower. **Use a bath thermometer** or test the temperature with your elbow. If in doubt, run more cold water.

**4.** **Submerge a burn in cool water**. Skin can be burned by flames, steam, hot water or hot grease, and continues to “cook” after the initial exposure. The best first aid for a burn or scald is to submerge the burn in cool water. Other remedies can make the burn worse. For example, **do not apply ice** (ice can cause freeze burns and aggravate the situation); do not put the burned skin under high-pressure, rapidly running water – it could cause the burned skin to break away thereby exposing the burn to greater danger from infection; and **do not apply grease or butter** – these products just help the burn cook!

**5.** Place a **clean, dry bandage or cloth** over the burn. **Avoid gauze** or other loosely woven fabric which can stick to burned skin.

**6.** If the burn is serious, call for help immediately. Severe burns need to be **treated at Burn Centers** where specially-trained staff and special equipment is available. Demand to be treated at the nearest Burn Center if your burns are serious.

**7.** If your clothes catch fire, **STOP, DROP AND ROLL**. If you are physically able, be sure to practice this important fire safety action. Running gives the flames fresh oxygen.

## Smoking

- 1.** Whether or not you smoke, friends and relatives who visit your home may. It is important, in either case, to be **careful with all smoking materials.**
- 2.** **Don't leave cigarettes, cigars or pipes unattended.** Put out all smoking materials before you walk away.
- 3.** **Don't put ashtrays on the arms of sofas or chairs.** The ashtray can be tipped easily, spilling hot ashes or burning cigarettes onto the carpet or furniture.
- 4.** **Use large ashtrays with wide lips.** While smaller ashtrays may be more attractive, they are not safe. Cigarettes can roll off the edge, and ashes can easily be blown around.
- 5.** **Close a matchbook before striking,** and hold it away from your body. Set your cigarette lighter on "low" flame to prevent burns.
- 6.** **Empty all ashtrays into the toilet** or a metal container. Warm ashes dumped in waste cans can smolder for hours, then ignite surrounding trash. An option is to place the ashtray in the kitchen sink and fill with water. Let it remain overnight before disposing.
- 7.** **NEVER, NEVER smoke in bed.** Make it a rule not to allow any smoking materials in bedrooms. Burning sheets, blankets and other bedclothes create a fire from which escape may be impossible. Toxic fumes from the smoke can kill before flames ever break out. Don't smoke in bed.
- 8.** **If you begin to feel drowsy while watching television or reading, extinguish your cigarette or cigar.** Do it before you nod off.
- 9.** If friends or relatives who smoke have visited, be sure to **check on the floor and around chair cushions for ashes** that may have been dropped accidentally.

## Home Escape Planning

- 1.** There are **three essential items that should be kept by your bedside:** a telephone, a whistle, and your eyeglasses. You need your **glasses** to see how to escape from fire and to avoid injury. The **whistle** serves two purposes: it lets people know where you are so that you can be rescued, and it enables you to warn other family members of fire. Your first priority in a fire is to get out of the building. Don't stop to call the Fire Department until you are safely outside. If you cannot escape by the door, the **telephone** allows you to call for help while attempting to escape by your back-up route (e.g., a window, etc.).
- 2.** **If you use a wheelchair or walker,** check all the exit routes in advance to be sure you can get through the doorways. If not, map out escape routes that are accessible, and discuss your escape plans with your family, the building manager or neighbors.
- 3.** **If you have impairments** that might make it more difficult for you to escape from fire, consider talking to your Fire Department and letting them know of your special circumstances in advance.
- 4.** **Plan your escape route.** You should have a primary and a back-up route mapped out for each room. Practice getting out. It may seem foolish to do so, or unnecessary (of course you know how to find the front door), but when there is fire and smoke, your reasoning and thought patterns may be affected by the emergency. If you have practiced escape routes, your memory and instinct will help you move in the right direction and in the right way. **Check all windows** from which escape is planned. Can you open the window, or is it painted or nailed shut? Make sure your exits allow exit!

**5.** Always sleep with your **bedroom door closed**. If you are awakened by the sound of your smoke detector, follow these steps: go to the door; **feel the door to see if it is hot**. If the door is not hot, open it slowly and check to see if you can get out safely. Leave immediately, if possible – **bending low or even crawling** to keep your head below smoke. If the door is hot, don't open it! Stuff towels or clothing under the door to prevent smoke from entering. Do the same at the top of the door if you can reach it. Exit the room using your back-up plan.

**6.** **Do not delay escape** because you want to collect valuables and memorabilia. Leave them behind – your safe escape is too important to jeopardize. Once you are safe, remain outside. Do not re-enter the building. Call the Fire Department from a neighbor's home, but first make sure other family members know you have gotten out safely. They may be looking for you while you are elsewhere alerting the Fire Department.

**7.** **If you cannot escape** from the room, open the window a crack and hang a white sheet or light-colored blanket out the window. Call the Fire Department. Blow your whistle to let rescuers know where you are. Stay low and remain calm.

## Heaters

**1.** **Check your room heaters** frequently to make sure that they are in good working condition. Dirty, neglected heaters are critical fire hazards.

**2.** Never use fuel burning appliances without **proper vents to the outside**. Burning fuel (kerosene, coal or propane, for example) produces **deadly fumes**.

**3.** **Make sure that there is enough clearance** (usually at least three feet) in all directions of the space heaters.

**4.** Use **only the proper fuel** for each heater, and **never quicken a fire** by using kerosene or gasoline.

**5.** **Store flammable fuels** like kerosene **outside of your home**.

**6.** **When refilling an oil or kerosene unit**, avoid overfilling it. Cold oil will expand as it warms up, which can cause burner-flooding. Also, **do not fill your heater while it is burning**.

**7.** For electric heaters, check to see that your house wiring is adequate and that your circuit and extension cords are not overloaded

**8.** **Do not use electric space heaters in your bathrooms**, and do not touch

**9.** Use **screens around stoves** or space heaters that have open flames.

**10.** Do not dry or store objects on top of your heater.

**11.** If you are using an approved UL label heater or heating stove in your bedroom, **turn it off or turn it low before going to bed**. Make sure that a window is open when using a kerosene heater in your bedroom to enhance ventilation.

**12.** Only use safety listed equipment. **Look for a UL label** with an oil heater, an **AGA or UL label** for a gas appliance and a **UL label** for an electric heater.

## Electric

**1.** Regularly inspect your extension cords for fraying, exposed wires or loose plugs. They are not intended for use as permanent wiring. Unplug them when not in use.

**2.** If you need to plug in two or three appliances, lamps, etc., **do not use a simple extension cord.** It is better to get a UL-approved unit that has built-in circuit breakers.

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