

Safe Homes

What You Don't Know Actually *May* Kill You

Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety. – William Shakespeare

If you're an avid reader of our monthly column, you're likely aware that we gravitate towards snarky entertainment while attempting to educate our stakeholders about critical (but often inscrutable or, nay, boring!?) home issues.

If you're *not* an avid reader, may we suggest that you get on the train before it completely leaves the station? You've missed out on two years of *serious* (and amusing) home education. Never fear, we've archived the entire series on our web site, the link for which is presented below (and to make it really easy, the link is way, way, way down at the bottom of this page).

For this edition, we're going to shy away from our typical humor-wrapped education because, unlike a plugged toilet, home safety definitely is *not* a joking matter. So with that in mind, we'll temporarily leave the comedy behind because when something goes dreadfully wrong, it really *can* kill you.

And pay attention, because although you probably believe that you've "heard it all before," a home safety refresher is never a waste of time and can help you and your family from getting hurt.

Home Safety: One Size Does *Not* Fit All

Home safety. What comes to your mind when you hear those two words together? Keeping your baby safe? Keeping your toddler or infant safe? Keeping your kids or teenagers safe? Keeping your elderly parents safe?

As you can probably discern, the answers will be radically different depending on the individuals or group of individuals you're trying to protect. Toddlers need very different safety measures than teenagers and young adults need very different safety measures than elderly parents.

Therefore, the first key to home safety is to know your target safety groups – just exactly who are you trying to keep safe?

Winter, Summer, Slips and Falls

According to the National Safety Council (NSC), unintentional falls caused or led to 18,807 deaths in 2004. We've already anticipated your first question: "Wow, how does the NSC count so accurately?" We can only guess that they're amazing counters. Your second question likely is "Why is the NSC still reporting on data that is 10 years old?" Well, perhaps it takes a *long* time to count so accurately.

Whatever the final accounting on deaths related to falls in the home, the short answer is that although all age groups are vulnerable, older adults are most at risk – approximately 80% of fatal injuries from falls were people over the age of 65. And as Baby Boomers continue to blossom into retirement, falling

undoubtedly will continue to be the major reason for injury-related deaths, injuries and hospital admissions for older adults.

Here's a summary of NSC's tips to minimize the threat of falling for humanoids of all ages:

- **Keep floors clear and clean** – Wipe grease, water, food and remove the occasional rogue banana peel
- **Keep stairs clear** – Stairs are one of a home's biggest pain points, so keep 'em free and clear
- **Play the gate-keeper** – Secure safety gates at the top of stairs
- **Reduce clutter** – Tuck telephone and electrical cords out of walkways and stow the TV remotes
- **Avoid the skids** – Use non-skid throw rugs or rugs secured by rubber pads or carpet backing
- **Secure handrails** – Make sure stairways and bathtubs have secure handrails
- **Illuminati** – Make sure living areas are well lit
- **Snakes and ladders** – If you *must* climb to a high place, ask someone to hold your ladder
- **Straps and harnesses** – Always strap children into highchairs
- **Furniture falls** – Don't leave babies alone on a couch or bed

The Ever-Present Threat of Burning Flames

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), US fire departments responded to *370,000 home structure fires* which caused 13,910 injuries, 2,520 deaths and \$6.9 billion in property damage; on average, seven people died in US home fires per day from 2007 to 2011.

The number one cause of home fires? Cooking-related accidents. Fires from faulty heating equipment and cigarette smoking are the second and third leading causes of home fires, respectively.

Cooking is Fun – Except When It Starts a Fire

In our best Cajun accent, “We guar-an-tee it” – Two of every five home fires start in the kitchen.

The sad fact is that lots and lots of kitchen fires are avoidable – 34% of reported home cooking fires were caused by inattentive cooks or unattended stovetops or ovens. The other two-thirds were started because of ignition of food (that's right, the food catches on fire) or other cooking materials (we can only guess, but we'd imagine that includes oils and fats).

Here's a summary of NFPA's tips for preventing cooking fires:

- **Shackle the chef** – Handcuff the cook to the stove and *never* leave a cook top unattended
- **Clear the cook top** – Do we really have to say this? Don't use your cooktop or oven for storage
- **Beware the little humans** – Children under five face a higher risk of non-fire burns associated with cooking and hot food and drinks than being burned in a cooking fire

- **Monitor the microwave** – Microwaves are one of the leading appliances which cause scald burn injuries

Heating Equipment – Maintain for No Pain

The leading factor contributing to heating equipment fires was simple and, again, avoidable: failure to clean, principally creosote from solid fuel heating equipment, primarily chimneys.

Another major factor in house fires is combustibles which ignite because they're too close to the heater; one half of home heating fire deaths resulted from fires caused by heating equipment too close to things that can burn.

Here's a summary of NFPA's tips for preventing heating equipment fires:

- **Chim, chimney, cheree** – Hire a chimney sweep to clean your chimney
- **No combustibles allowed** – Keep combustibles (upholstered furniture, clothing, mattresses, bedding) away from heat sources
- **No space heaters** – Brave the cold; fixed or portable space heaters are involved in about 4 out of 5 heating fire deaths
- **Pull the cord** – Check all cords for frays or cracks, which can spark and cause fires
- **Service the electrics** – All electrical components in your home should be serviced and monitored; about half of home electrical fires involved electrical distribution or lighting equipment
- **Service the appliances** – Other suspects for starting fires include washer, dryer, air conditioning equipment, water heater and range; get an annual service contract to have the equipment checked by a professional.

Just Say No: Stop the Smoking

During 2007 to 2011, smoking "materials" (primarily cigarettes) caused an estimated 17,900 home structure fires, resulting in almost 600 deaths, 1,280 injuries and \$509 million in property damage per year.

A common name for a cigarette is "cancer stick." But given the havoc that smoking wreaks in relation to home fires, cigarettes could just as well be referred to as "death sticks" for their all-around ability to kill. In the case of home safety, most fires caused by cigarettes are related to a person falling asleep while smoking. In fact, sleep-related smoking fires were a factor in almost 1/3 of the home smoking material fire deaths.

Although the US and Canada have required cigarettes to be "fire safe" (reduced ignition strength), the real answer is simple – take the smoke outside. Not only will smoking outside be much less likely to cause a fire, it may also help to improve health.

Ever Ready: Smoke Alarms and Escape Plans

Install and check your smoke alarms. Simple recommendation, right?

Unfortunately, although the recommendation may appear to be self-evident, our inspectors report inoperable smoke alarms in dozens of homes every single day, even though working smoke alarms reduce the risk of dying in home fires by one half. Regrettably, almost 60% of reported home fire deaths from 2007 to 2011 resulted from fires in homes with *no smoke alarms* or *no working smoke alarms*.

For the best protection, or where extra time is needed to awaken or assist others, ionization and photoelectric alarms are recommended; an ionization smoke alarm is generally more responsive to flaming fires and a photoelectric smoke alarm is generally more responsive to smoldering fires.

Last but not least, develop, communicate and practice an escape plan.

Even with the best fire prevention methods, accidents happen. Unfortunately, only 1/3 of US households have developed *and practiced* a home fire escape plan, according to the NFPA. And even though approximately 75% of US households have an escape plan, more than half have never practiced the plan.

Home Security – Lock Your Doors and Windows

Although we hadn't planned initially to address home *security* in a discussion regarding home *safety*, we'd be remiss in not mentioning home security because, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, home break-in (burglary) is the most common threat to our homes.

In the US, home burglaries occur approximately every 15 seconds. Even the math-challenged can suffer the calculation: 2.1 million home burglaries annually. And although each burglary costs about \$2,100, we all know it's not the financial loss that typically matters – it's the pervasive sense of violation.

Perhaps the most shocking statistic isn't the number of burglaries, it's this simple fact – about 1/3 of all burglaries occur via an unlocked door or window. Think about it – by zealously following a simple “check the locks” routine, over 700,000 burglaries could be prevented.

Home Security Rule Número Uno – Always lock your doors and windows before you leave your home.

Common Sense is the Best Medicine – Building Security Barriers

How do you like that mixed metaphor? But seriously, most burglaries are committed by “casual criminals” (are there such animals?) who are thwarted by any barrier which makes it more difficult to commit their “casual” crimes. Once again, common sense is the relevant buzz-phrase.

- Close and lock your garage door(s) at all times
- Leave blinds, shades and curtains in their standard positions
- Make your home yell and scream if it is violated (consider installing an alarm system)
- Hide emergency keys in inconspicuous places (forget the doormat and the garden gnome)
- Use motion sensors for lights on the exterior of your home
- Don't be shy – as painful as it may be, get acquainted with your neighbors and keep eyes open for suspicious characters or vehicles at your neighbors' homes
- Resist the temptation to broadcast your holiday plans (don't brag about your vacation on Facebook until you *return* from holiday)
- Cut your grass while you're on holiday (or more accurately, have someone *else* cut your grass unless you have the power to be in two places at the same time)

Most of the aforementioned recommendations are simple enough, right?

But understanding *what to do* typically is not the issue. *Complacency* is the challenge. Most of us *know* what to do regarding home security but many of us relax when there appears to be no threat of burglary or home invasion. After all, it couldn't happen in *my* neighborhood, right?

Wrong. Don't be complacent. Stay vigilant, stay aware, stay safe.

Falls, Fires and Furglars

We've only briefly touched upon three major home safety issues – falls, fires and home security.

There obviously are many other areas which require vigilance, not the least of which are home inspection issues which we report consistently, including safety issues with stairs and railings, decks, pools, and hot tubs. The good news is that proper prevention and consistently applied home safety techniques significantly reduce the probability of home safety issues.

Slips and falls, fires and burglaries don't discriminate – it's much easier to prevent than to regret. And regardless of the home safety challenge, the best advice is the most simple advice – use common sense and never take safety for granted.

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