

Public Platform

Home Fire Safety for Seniors What Family Members Can Do

Fire safety is a crucial issue for seniors who choose to live in their own home. Those caring for aging loved ones who wish to remain at home need to understand the fire risks and how to deal with them.

Older adults face fire risk factors which do not affect the young. Weaker physical (and sometimes mental) capabilities make it harder to identify and respond to a fire, and create a higher risk that a fire will start.

Age-related changes affect the senses and reduce mobility. Cognitive changes, from memory loss to dementia, can be more hazardous than the physical changes: individuals may not realize they are in danger and may even engage in risky behavior. Alcohol consumption or the side effects of prescribed medication can add to the risks.

Seniors on fixed incomes may feel they cannot afford home improvements. Nonetheless, adaptations and repairs are necessary to enable independent living. Older adults should install safety aids, and replace outdated appliances and electrical devices. Emergency evacuation can pose a challenge for older adults, and should be a priority when planning renovations.

Seniors often need assistance from family members to put safety measures into place. As well, family members are in the best position to reinforce the precautions necessary to help their loved ones prevent or respond to a fire. Focus on these six priorities to help aging family members protect themselves against fire in the home.

1. Smoke Alarms

Install a smoke alarm on each level of the home and outside all sleeping areas: in Ontario this is now the law. Anyone who sleeps with the bedroom doors closed should have a smoke alarm inside the bedroom. Test each alarm monthly and replace the battery twice a year. Remind loved ones that if they hear the smoke alarm "chirp" it means the battery needs to be replaced immediately. Seniors who are deaf or hard of hearing should consider purchasing flashing or vibrating smoke alarms.

2. Escape Plan

Many seniors still depend on escape routes that were planned when the kids were young. Update these plans with their current capabilities in mind, and practise with them. Make sure there are two ways out of each room. Keep hallways and stairs uncluttered. Instruct seniors to call 911 from a neighbour's house, and not to go back inside their home. If they cannot leave on their own, they should still dial 911. Place a telephone beside the bed, as well as slippers, house keys, eyeglasses and a flashlight.

3. Smoking

Careless smoking is a leading cause of fire deaths for the elderly. If your loved ones smoke, stress that they must never smoke in bed. When they are finished smoking, have them soak the ashes in water before discarding them. Advise them never to leave smoking materials unattended, and ensure that they collect them in large, deep ashtrays.

4. Cooking

Cooking fires are the number one cause of fire injuries among older adults. Emphasize that they must never leave cooking food unattended. If they need to step away, they should turn off the stove. Keep lids nearby so that if the pan catches fire, they can carefully slide the lid on it and turn off the stove. Mount a fire extinguisher in the kitchen, and check the pressure gauge monthly. Also, remind seniors not to wear loose clothing when cooking: a dangling sleeve can easily catch fire. Keep towels and potholders away from the stove. Clean the exhaust hood and the duct over the stove regularly.



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How the Senses Affect Fire Safety

The senses, which serve as a built-in warning system against fire, deteriorate as people grow older.

During waking hours the sense of smell can help detect a fire, a potential fire, or a stove or oven left on after cooking. However, don't count on smell to detect smoke or fires during sleep! The sense of smell, and the ability to detect smoke diminishes with age.

Touch can determine an appliance is overheating or a doorknob is scorching, and can trigger a quick reaction to prevent a fire. The acuteness of this sense can be measured by the ability to gauge the difference between cool, cold, neutral, warm and hot, and to feel and hold things normally. In

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many older adults the sense of touch becomes weaker. That makes daily tasks such as unplugging electrical cords harder to do. Touch problems, as well as thinning skin, lead to a higher risk for burn injuries and increased severity of burns for seniors.

Eye problems and vision loss constitute a serious fire risk. Older adults may not be able to see a fire, notice potential hazards (such as a falling candle or a cigarette that has tumbled from a bedside ashtray) or locate doors and escape routes. People with poor vision are more likely to stumble and fall when in a hurry, impeding their ability to escape from a fire. Glasses help the eyes focus, but may not solve all vision problems. In any case, an older adult awakened at night in an emergency may have difficulty finding the glasses.

People with normal hearing easily hear the blare of a smoke alarm and other warning sounds of a fire. On the other hand, aging adults with hearing loss may not be able to hear these sounds, especially while sleeping. Δ

Source: Fred P. Baumgartner, Firepoint Technologies Inc. (www.firepoint.ca)