



ARTICLES

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Senior Safety News

Our May issue focuses on fires and their dangers to seniors. We provide tips for seniors on how to avoid fires and promote fire safety.

We are focusing on hazards in the kitchen because of feedback we received from Terry Asbury from Altamonte Springs Florida. Terry reminded us that the leading cause of fire for seniors in the kitchen is unattended cooking. We are going to update our Kitchen Fire Safety Checklist and the website.

We welcome observations of our site and its information.

It is the people, on the ground, working with seniors everyday who can help us improve our service.

Incidentally, we want to introduce you to our new community safety awareness program. We developed this model last year in conjunction with Broward County Florida. As a result we developed the Senior Safety Neighborhood Awareness Project. Visit (SSNAP).

www.seniorsafetyonline.com



Fire Fatalities in Elderly People

Introduction

Dwelling-house fires account for 30% of fatalities in household accidents and 10% of all accident fatalities and currently cause over 100 deaths each year in Scotland [1]. Approximately one-quarter of people killed in dwelling-house fires are over 75 years of age and although risk factors associated with death in dwelling-house fires have been previously studied [2-4], little specific information pertaining to elderly victims has been available. This has been highlighted in a recent review of accidental deaths amongst elderly individuals [5]. As effective prevention is dependent on accurate characterization of risk, we have analysed and compared basic clinical details of elderly and younger individuals who died in dwelling-house fires between 1980 and 1990 in Scotland.

The data reported here form part of a much larger database collated retrospectively by review of fire brigade and procurator fiscal records for all known fire incidents and fatalities occurring in Scotland between 1980 and 1990 [1]. A primary objective of the main study was to produce information that might help target the implementation of effective fire prevention schemes. In the study period, 1647 fire fatalities occurred of which 1248 were in dwelling-house fires. Adequate information for inclusion in the study was available in 1096 dwelling-house fire fatalities.

In this report we compare data from two groups identified from within this database: subjects aged 75 years or more at the time of death and those aged less than 75 years at the time of death. Proportions are compared by [chi square] with a p value of <0.05 defined as significant.

Results

The age distribution of fire fatalities are shown and compared in Table I. The risk of dwelling-house fire death is greatest amongst those aged over 80 years. In the 11-year period studied 243 (23%) of the 1096 people dying in household fires were aged 75 years or more.

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Table I. Age distribution of fire fatalities in Scotland 1991

Age (years)	Total fatalities	% of fatalities	% of population	Risk ratio
0-9	136	12.4	12.7	0.98
10-19	31	2.8	13.1	0.22
20-29	60	5.5	16.5	0.33
30-39	69	6.3	16.5	0.38
40-49	125	11.2	12.7	0.88
50-59	128	11.7	10.9	1.07
60-69	181	16.6	10.0	1.65
70-79	209	19.1	6.8	2.83
[greater than or equal to]80	157	14.4	3.3	4.41
Total	1096			



Many elderly individuals living in the community have reduced capacity to detect and escape fire. The prevention of the outbreak of fire, combined with effective early warning of the presence of fire are therefore of greater importance. All those involved in the assessment of community-dwelling elderly people should be aware of the enhanced risk of fire and fire death in this group and pursue the development of more effective fire prevention strategies.

Fire Safety for Seniors

There are a number of precautionary steps older Americans can take to avoid the risk of fire.

Understanding the Risks

Why Are Older People at Risk?

Older Americans are at risk for a number of reasons:

- Ø They may be less able to take the quick action necessary in a fire emergency.
- Ø They may be on medication that affects their ability to make quick decisions.
- Ø Many older people live alone and when accidents happen others may not be around to help.

What Fire Hazards Affect older people?

- Ø Cooking accidents are the leading cause of fire related injuries for older Americans. The kitchen is one .. of the most active and potentially dangerous rooms in the home.
- Ø The unsafe use of smoking materials is the leading cause of fire deaths among older Americans.
- Ø Heating equipment is responsible for a big share of fires in seniors' homes. Extra caution should be used with alternate heaters such as wood stoves or electric space heaters.
- Ø Faulty wiring is another major cause of fires affecting the elderly. Older homes can have serious wiring . problems, ranging from old appliances with bad wiring to overloaded sockets.

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Safety Tips for Seniors

- Ø Kitchen Fires. *Most kitchen fires occur because food is left unattended on the stove or in the oven.* If you must leave the kitchen while cooking, take a spoon or potholder with you to remind you to return to the kitchen. Never cook with loose, dangling sleeves that can ignite easily. Heat cooking oils gradually and use extra caution when deep-frying. If a fire breaks out in a pan, put a lid on the pan. Never throw water on a grease fire. Never use a range or stove to heat your home.
- Ø Space Heaters. Buy only Underwriter’s Laboratory (UL) approved heaters. Use only the manufacturer’s recommended fuel for each heater. Do not use electric space heaters in the bathroom or around other wet areas. Do not dry or store objectson top of your heater. Keep combustibles away from heat sources.
- Ø Smoking. Don’t leave smoking materials unattended. Use “safety ashtrays” with wide lips. Empty all ash trays into the toilet or a metal container every night before going to bed. Never smoke in bed.



While the kitchen is often referred to as the “heart of the house,” it can be a dangerous place for elderly or disabled people. Poor vision, failing memory, and poor balance can all contribute to the problem.

Fortunately, there are ways to minimize the risk and keep our loved ones safe. There are even ways to do this without making mom and dad feel offended!

Let’s start by looking at some of the dangers that exist in the kitchen. First, there is falling. Falls are common among the elderly in any room, but may be even more likely to occur in the kitchen. Elderly people may try to stand up on a chair to reach high shelves or cabinets. Spills or simply washing dishes in the skin can cause wet, slippery floors. Bending over to reach low items may also upset one’s balance.

To prevent falls, place a water-absorbent, non-skid mat in front of the sink. Use kitchen chairs with arms so that elderly people can get sit and stand up more easily. Never keep chairs on wheels in the kitchen (unless, of course, your loved one uses a wheelchair to get around). Avoid putting often-used items on high shelves or in high cabinets. Also, get a sturdy stepstool, just in case your loved one needs to get something out of their reach. Make sure there is adequate lighting.



Now, on to the hot stuff. I’m sure we’ve all burnt ourselves at some point while cooking, regardless of how careful we are. There are ways reduce the risk in the kitchen, however.

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Dr. Rein Tideiksaar, Educational Coordinator of Geriatrics and Adult Development at Mt. Sinai Medical Center, suggest making sure there is a working smoke detector in the kitchen and making sure a small fire extinguisher is easily available.

In addition, avoid wearing bathrobes or other clothing with long, loose sleeves, which could catch fire from a stove burner.

Stovetop fires can also be prevented by keeping the area around the stove free of flammable items, such as junk mail, paper towels, dish cloths, etc. Make sure there are no window curtains close to the stove.

Senior Safety Online's Kitchen Safety Checklist

Heating

- Do you regularly clean your stove, toaster and toaster oven surfaces? Yes () No ()
- Do you keep your stove's oven clean?..... Yes () No ()
- If you have a coal or wood stove, is it inspected once a year? Yes () No ()

Electrical

- Do you plug only one cord into electrical outlets? Yes () No ()
- Are the cords and appliances in good shape?..... Yes () No ()
- Do you have GFCI electrical outlets installed? Yes () No ()

Cooking

- Do you stay in the kitchen when food is cooking? Yes () No ()
- Do you keep combustible material away from the stove and toaster?..... Yes () No ()
- Do you avoid loose clothing, especially sleeves, when cooking? Yes () No ()
- Do you use oven mitts?..... Yes () No ()
- Do you know how to put out a pan fire by sliding lid over flames? Yes () No ()
- Do you turn pots and pans handles toward the back of stove when cooking?..... Yes () No ()
- Do you remove coverings from micro waved food carefully? Yes () No ()
- Do you turn off your oven when not in the kitchen Yes () No ()

A downloadable pdf file can be found in [Senior Safety's website](#)

Technology such as medical alert bracelets can help to keep seniors safe while living at home longer. Seniors can get immediate help whether they fall, there is a fire or someone breaks in.