

READY ...OR NOT?



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Don't be complacent: Preventing home fires begins with you

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A 24-year-old sergeant and his 2-year-old daughter are killed in a house fire at an east coast Army installation. Investigators determine the fire started in the kitchen as a result of "unattended cooking involving the use of an open frying pan and cooking oil."

A family awakens to find their Binghamton, New York, home engulfed in flames. They escape, but discover their 17-year-old son is trapped inside. Lost and confused in the dark, smoke-filled house, the teen succumbs to smoke inhalation. No escape plans were in place or ever practiced. Investigators determine that an overloaded or faulty electrical wiring circuit was likely the cause of the fire.

Firefighters responding to a house fire in Queens, New York, find two siblings, huddled together and holding hands, lying on the floor burned and unresponsive. Though emergency personnel attempt to revive the 11- and 6-year-olds, they subsequently die from extensive burns. Overcome with tears, the mother tells the responders how she often told the older sibling to "always watch over and protect his younger brother." Fire marshals later determine the cause of the fire was a candle left burning.

Whether in the kitchen, bedroom, living room, basement or garage, on or off an installation, most fires could be avoided, said Sgt. 1st Class Tommy W. Norris Jr., assistant chief of fire prevention, Fort Rucker, Alabama.

"All too often, they're a direct result of complacency," Norris said. "Individuals neglect to take the necessary precautions and, like combat, this complacency kills."

Statistics confirm the fire chief's observations.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, each year an estimated 364,500 residential fires account for 2,450 deaths and 13,900 injuries. In addition, damages as a result of these fires cost property owners nearly \$6.7 billion annually.

Norris said that if you were to investigate the root cause of these fires, you'd find that most of them began as a direct result of just plain, careless neglect.

"How many times have we overlooked cleaning the dryer vent, not kept our smoke detectors in working order, left food cooking unattended on the stovetop, leave candles burning, smoke a cigarette and doze off, fail to clean the fireplace, or attempt to barbecue or fry a turkey in an enclosed area?" Norris said. "We're just too complacent and it comes at great cost to our families. Even those home fires cited earlier could have been avoided had the proper 'common sense' preventive measures been taken."

Norris offered the following tips to help families prevent tragedies in the home.

Kitchen fires

- Be a safe cook. Watch what you're doing and never leave the stove unattended, especially when cooking over high heat or open flames, such as when frying, grilling or broiling.
- Keep a pan lid, cookie sheet or an all-purpose fire extinguisher readily available to cover and smother grease fires. Fire extinguishers should be rated for grease and electrical fires.
- Never cook if tired or under any medication that might make you drowsy, to include alcohol.
- Maintain a kid-free zone three feet around the stove and areas where hot food or beverages are prepared or carried. Keep pets away from the kitchen while you're cooking.
- Keep pot/pan handles toward the center and away from the edge of the stove.
- Keep items (e.g., oven mitts, potholders, food packaging, kitchen towels or wooden utensils) that can catch fire away from electric or gas burners.
- Don't wear loose-fitting clothes or long sleeves while cooking. These items could catch fire.
- Never attempt to use an outdoor grill indoors.
- Ensure all kitchen stoves, appliances and grills are turned off, clean and ready for the next use.

Electrical fires

- Purchase and use only those appliances that have been tested and certified for home use by a recognized testing laboratory such as Underwriters Laboratories, Inc.
- Inspect all electrical appliances and extension cords often and replace them immediately if you find any signs of wear, damage or loose connections.
- Plug only one high-wattage or heat-producing appliance, such as a toaster, microwave or refrigerator, into a receptacle or outlet at a time even though it has space for two.
- Unplug unused appliances. Never leave irons, hair dryers, coffee makers or toasters plugged when not in use.
- Use light bulbs on lamps and light fixtures according to the manufacturer's specifications. Don't use bulbs that exceed the lamp's wattage capacity. Lamps should also be placed on stable surfaces to prevent falling and breaking.
- Keep space heaters at least three feet away from anything that can ignite and turn them off when you leave the room or go to bed. Ensure fuel-burning heaters have adequate ventilation to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.

Clothes dryer safety

- Ensure the dryer is properly installed and regularly maintained by a certified professional.
- Clean out the lint filter after each use and the lint vent pipe at least once a year.
- Clean behind and around the dryer for any lint or dust buildup.
- Don't overload the dryer.
- Don't dry any clothes that could be contaminated with flammable or combustible liquids such as gas, oil, paint thinner, nail polish or nail polish remover.
- If you plan to leave or go to sleep, don't leave the dryer running.

Smoke detectors

- Install smoke detectors inside and outside each bedroom and on every level of the home, to include the basement. If possible, smoke detectors should be interconnected so when one alarms, they all do.
- Test each smoke alarm at least once a month and replace batteries at least twice a year.
- Encourage children to test smoke alarms and become familiar with the sounds.

Escape plans

- Implement and practice an escape plan with all home occupants, especially children.
- Keep bedroom doors shut while sleeping. If you think there's a fire, feel the door and knob for heat before attempting to open.

- Map an escape route for each area of the home and designate a meeting place outside.
- Instruct children to “crawl underneath the smoke” to escape a fire and not to hide. They want to make sure firefighters will be able to locate and rescue them.
- Once outside, “stop, drop and roll” is another safety principle that should be ingrained in children’s minds.
- Everyone must understand that once you’ve escaped, never re-enter a burning building, no matter what you might have left behind.
- Call emergency responders (911) from a neighbor’s house. Ensure young children know their street address, last name and how to dial 911.
- Practice, practice and practice your escape plans regularly, especially with young children to ensure they’re comfortable and familiar with the actions they should take in the event of a fire.
- Finally, after you’ve taken care of the family, alert firefighters of any pets that may be inside.

Planning your family’s safety begins at home and taking these few preventive measures will help ensure they’ll be around for years to come, according to Norris.

“Remember, the key to their safety rests on your shoulders.”

For more information on fire safety, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.