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Home safety is no accident

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"The house burned down tonight."

Cathy awoke at 3:30 a.m. from a deep sleep in the fall of 2003 to hear her brother say those words about her childhood home. Luckily, her parents, who were there at the time, survived the blaze.

"My mother and father were at home with the two cats," said Cathy, who wishes to remain anonymous. "My mother had cooked a snack and took it with her to a bedroom down the hall where she was using her computer, and my father was asleep on the sofa in the den." Cathy, who was married and living in another city in 2003, said her mother heard a loud, crackling sound and went to investigate to find the kitchen completely in flames.

"The den was the room next to the kitchen," she said. "My mother somehow woke my father and assisted him out the back door while dialing 911."

In their haste, they left their two cats behind, but one followed them out the door and survived. The other died from smoke inhalation.

Although Cathy's parents survived the fire that destroyed their house, fires and burns are the third leading cause of death at home, according to the Home Safety Council's 2004 State of

Home Safety in America report, which they say is the most comprehensive body of research on the severity and causes of home injuries in the U. S. The Home Safety Council also cited four other home injuries in the top five from their report: falls, poisoning, choking and suffocation, and drowning and submersions.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Joseph Reese, senior maintenance officer, Ground Task Force, U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center, identified fires, poisons and falls as some of the top home injuries for Soldiers.

"The common mistake people make at home that leads to injuries is they don't identify hazards and learn which preventive measures to take to avoid accidents," he said.

Falls

The Home Safety Council report listed falls as the No. 1 cause of home injuries. Elderly people 70 years or older are most at risk for fatal falls. However, anyone is susceptible to slips and falls, which accounted for 5.1 million home injuries annually, according to the council.

Reese advises people to put things in their proper place and don't just toss them on the floor where they can cause trips. He also suggested placing baby gates at the top and bottom of stairs to protect children and placing baths mats on wet floors and keeping floors dry. Reese also advised the use of nightlights to illuminate dark areas of the home at night.

Poisoning

Poisoning was the second most common home injury listed in the Home Safety Council report.

Reese said some of the causes of home poisonings are drinking unknown liquids, carbon monoxide and taking other people's medicines.

Reese recommended the following to reduce or mitigate home poisonings:

- Place cleaning products and medicines in locked cabinets.
- Install carbon monoxide detectors.
- Post the Poison Control Center number by the phone.

Fire and burns

Some of the reasons for fires and burns in the home include cooking and grilling accidents, children playing with matches and faulty electrical wires.

After losing her childhood home due to a kitchen fire, Cathy advises people to ensure all burners on the stove are turned off when not in use. She also said people should ensure smoke and fire alarms are working and have good batteries at all times.

The Home Safety Council report provides two main ways of reducing fires in homes: smoke alarms and fire escape plans.

It sounds simple, but 80 percent of people who have smoke alarms don't test them to ensure they are working, and 64 percent of families don't have fire escape plans.

Reese also suggested the following for reducing home fires:

- Remove matches, lighter fluid and other combustibles from children's reach.
- Keep a fire extinguisher in the kitchen and workshop.

Choking and suffocation

Coming in at fourth place on the Home Safety Council report, choking and suffocation were associated with food in one-third of deaths, while 16 percent of suffocations occurred in bedding or beds. Children, 5 or younger, and adults 70 or older, were most likely to die from suffocation and choking.

Some preventive measures to take include:

- Keep all plastic wrapping or packing materials away from young children.
- Things that can fit through a toilet paper tube can cause a young child to choke. Keep coins, latex balloons and hard round foods, such as peanuts and hard candy out of children's reach.
- Place children on their backs in beds and cribs. Don't put pillows, comforters or toys in cribs.
- Clip the loops on window cords and place them high above where children cannot reach them.
- Read the labels on all toys, especially if they have small parts. Be sure that your child is old enough to play with them.
- Tell children to sit down when they eat and to take small bites.
- Don't hang anything with strings or ribbons over cribs.
- Learn the Heimlich maneuver and CPR for all age groups.

Drowning and submersions

The fifth most prevalent cause of home injuries was drowning and submersions, according to Home Safety Council, with at least one-third of the unintentional home drownings occurring in bathtubs.

Children younger than 5 years old have the highest rates of drowning and near-drowning injuries in the home. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following to prevent drowning among children:

- Supervision while bathing or around any body of water.
- Removal of standing water from containers.
- Use of pool-side, U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices (life preservers).
- Properly installed four-sided fencing around swimming pools with self-closing, self-latching gates.
- Rescue equipment by the pool.
- First aid and CPR training.
- CPR instructions posted by the pool.
- Cordless telephones in the pool area and emergency numbers by the telephone.

Summary

While there are other causes of home injuries, the ones listed here are the most prevalent.

Reese said other accidents arise from yard work, do-it- yourself projects, lifting heavy objects and working on motor vehicles, among others. He advised that everyone learn about home hazards and take steps to prevent them. Other tips from Reese for preventing and reducing home accidents include:

- Keep a stocked first-aid kit in every location where an injury may occur.
- Wear safety glasses with side shields and ears protection when using power tools.
- Keep hazardous materials out of children's reach.
- Use the temperature control device on the hot water system to limit your tap water to 50-125 F.

For more information about home injury prevention, visit www.homesafetycouncil.org.

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