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## Home, Safe Home

Every year, tens of thousands of Americans die of injuries sustained in their own homes. Many of these accidents could be prevented by taking simple measures toward fire prevention, child-proofing, firearm safety, and common sense safety.

### Fire Prevention

Fire is a leading cause of death and injury at home, not to mention an expensive cause of property damage. Most fires in homes result from carelessness and can be prevented with a few simple precautions and a little common sense. Here are guidelines to follow in trying to decrease the risks of personal injury and property damage from fires in your home:

#### Install Smoke Detectors.

Smoke detectors are invaluable safety devices. Every home should be equipped with them. Locate your smoke detectors on the ceiling in the sleeping areas of your home and the areas where fires are most likely to start (the kitchen or garage). Have a detector on each level and in each bedroom area of your home.

Place the smoke detector at least 6 inches from where the wall joins the ceiling (the dead air space in a corner could prevent smoke from reaching the detector immediately). Keep the detector away from shower areas because steam can set off a detector.

Test your smoke detector monthly to make sure the batteries are good. Change batteries annually. If your smoke detector is wired to your home electrical systems, make sure they have back-up batteries.

#### Keep a Fire Extinguisher on Hand.

Have a fire extinguisher and fire blanket in the kitchen; if you have a garage, have another set there, too. Be sure family members are familiar with the operation of the extinguishers. Check annually.

#### Establish Escape Routes.

Be sure there are adequate escape routes. If needed, purchase fire ladders or other means of escaping from upstairs windows. Rehearse with your family procedures to follow in the event of fire. Designate a family meeting place so you can make sure everyone is accounted for.

Keep stairways and halls uncluttered. Never padlock an exit door.

#### Beware of Wood and Coal Stoves and Other Space Heaters.

Be sure that the area around an open-flame space heater in your home is properly fireproofed. Building codes vary, but for most space heaters the walls around them must be a specified distance away from the stove, or insulated with a fireproof material. The floor beneath and, if the stove opens from the front, in front, also must be insulated with a nonflammable material (see Keep Fireplaces and Chimneys Clean.)

Keep kerosene or other free-standing heaters out of frequently used traffic paths in your home and away from hallways and stairways in particular. Many fires are started when such heaters are knocked over, spilling fuel and igniting nearby furniture and surfaces.

## **Maintain Electrical Equipment.**

Make sure that the wiring in your home is up-to-date and in good order. If it is not, hire a qualified electrician to make the necessary repairs.

Do not overload wall outlets with adapters. Never increase the size of a fuse or circuit breaker as a means to sustain service of a line that is overloaded. If you do not increase the capacity of the wire in the line itself, it could heat up and start an electrical fire in the walls of your home.

Do not run extension cords across floors or under rugs or carpets. You can easily trip over exposed extension cords (especially at night). Over time, the wear and tear on a cord beneath a carpet can damage the insulation and lead to overheating and a fire hazard.

## **Keep Fireplaces and Chimneys Clean.**

Use a screen in front of your fireplace to prevent sparks from jumping out of the firebox. Never leave an open fire unattended.

Clean your chimney regularly. If you vent a woodstove into your chimney, clean the chimney twice a year. If a wood fire in your fireplace is only an occasional event, an every-other-year chimney cleaning may be sufficient. If you use your fireplace or wood-burning stove at all, however, have your chimney inspected for a buildup of creosote (a flammable resin that is a by-product of wood fires). Be sure that the chimney lining is intact. Do not postpone chimney repairs. Keep a chimney fire extinguisher on hand.

## **Never Smoke in Bed.**

Careless smoking leads to the greatest number of deaths by fire in the United States. Keep cigarettes, cigars, or pipes out of your bedroom. When disposing of butts and ashes, be sure no embers remain.

Beware of Fireworks

## **Remove Flammable Materials.**

Dispose of rags or papers contaminated with paint remover or other chemicals immediately; spontaneous combustion can occur, producing dangerous fumes and fire.

Store newspapers, other paper refuse, and any flammable trash away from heat sources. Locate paints and other household chemicals on a shelf that is both out of reach of children and away from any risk of exposure to sparks or heat. Store matches out of reach of children.

## **Preventing Poisonings**

Small children are at special risk of poisoning: Their curiosity is boundless and their bodies are small enough that relatively little poison can be harmful. Also, most small children put whatever they find into their mouths.

### **Keep Poisons Out of Reach.**

Seemingly innocent products such as shoe polish, nail polish, and nail polish remover can be hazardous. Make it a rule in your home that all hazardous items are to be kept in high cupboards, on tall shelves in closets, or in locked cabinets.

Designate such an area in your kitchen or utility room for household cleaners, another in your garage for garden or automotive poisons, and another in your bathroom. Garden sheds, cellars, and other areas where such goods are stored require similar precautions.

## **When Your Child Begins to Crawl.**

Before your baby reaches 6 months of age, child-proof your home. This gives you a chance to practice safety measures before your child becomes mobile. Protect your infant not only from risks within immediate reach but also from hazards to which your baby might crawl. Remember that almost overnight, your child's universe will expand from a crib, baby seat, and playpen to the entire house (see Safety).

Place gates at the tops and bottoms of staircases in your home. Make sure to lock or guard windows that may be accessible to your child. If your child is under age 6, he or she should not be in the top bunk of a bunk bed. Make sure your bunk bed has sturdy safety rails.

Electrical outlets are often a target of curiosity, so cover unused ones; inexpensive plug covers are available at most hardware stores.

Young children are forever experimenting, putting into their mouths whatever comes to hand. Keep substances that can hurt children (such as cleaning solutions, insecticides, and medications) stored well out of their reach. You may need to buy fixtures that make it difficult for a child to open lower cabinets.

Never store toxic substances in the "wrong" container. For example, if you store paint thinner in a juice bottle, your child may take a drink, thinking it is juice.

Identify toxic plants in and around your home. Keep them well out of reach of your baby (see Garden-Variety Poisonous Plants).

Keep matches out of your child's reach. In the kitchen, keep pot handles pointed toward the back of the stove. Do not use cloths or mats that your child can pull off the kitchen or dining room tables. Never leave a hot beverage near the edge of a table. Your child might pull the beverage off. Do not drink hot beverages with your child on your lap.

Keep the thermostat on your hot-water heater between 120 degrees F and 125 degrees F. At 160 degrees F, a child can quickly scald himself or herself.

In the bathroom, keep toilet seats covered. Use no-slip tub mats. Never leave your infant unattended in the bathtub, no matter how little water is present.

## **At Play.**

In laying out an outdoor play area for your child, locate it so that you can monitor activities from inside your home. Position equipment on grass, wood chips, sand, or other soft surfaces to reduce the risk of injury from inevitable falls. Anchor the equipment below the ground to prevent it from tipping.

Make sure that the equipment is safe and in good condition. Plane or sand rough wood to prevent splinters; file metal burrs smooth to avoid scrapes. Discard equipment that is fragile or worn out.

Establish rules. One person on the swing at a time; hold on with both hands, no standing or kneeling allowed.

At the playground-whether it is a public facility or in your backyard-supervise your young child's activity constantly.

## **Household Safety: A Checklist**

There is no such thing as an accident-free home. Accidents happen even to the most conscientious and careful people. However, you can decrease your risk of accident and injury at home. Here are some suggestions:

### **The Kitchen.**

Clean up spills promptly. Water, foods, or other substances on a hard-surfaced floor can cause slips, falls, and injury.

Use a step stool to reach high shelves; do not stand on a chair or countertop.

## Label All Poisons

### Household Goods.

Here is a sampling of common, potentially dangerous household poisons: alcohol of all kinds; virtually all cleaning products, especially those that contain chlorine bleach, ammonia, and detergents; toilet and drain cleaners (the latter often contain lye); cosmetics; paint and paint products such as turpentine and paint thinner; and furniture and floor polishes.

### Garden and Garage Aids.

Many of us use chemicals to control pests in or around our homes. Roach powders, rat pellets, rose dust, and other home, yard, and farm chemicals are common and, when used as directed, quite safe. However, when swallowed, virtually all are dangerous poisons, as are fuels and oils (including gasoline and kerosene); weed killers; flower, garden, and shrub sprays; and roach, rat, and other poisons.

### Medications.

Aspirin, acetaminophen, prescription medications, cough medicine, cold pills, and all other drugs can also pose a danger.

(For more information see preventing or dealing with poisonings.)

## Child-Proofing Your Home

Accidents are the leading cause of death among children. Indeed, about one of every two children who die does so because of an accident.

Making your home safe for youngsters is an important priority, whether your child is very young and has no sense of danger or old enough to experiment deliberately with the hazards of your home.

### Protecting Your Baby.

Today, beds for babies must meet federal standards. Space between crib bars can be no more than 2 3/8 inches. This prevents infants from getting their heads stuck between the bars. If you are using an old crib, make certain that the bars are spaced in accordance with these specifications:

The crib should have no sharp edges. A locking mechanism should keep the sides up. The distance from the top of the rail to the mattress should be at least 26 inches when the mattress is at its lowest level. The mattress should fit snugly. Use bumper pads to prevent your baby from banging against the sides. A pillow is unnecessary and should not be used.

Check for lead-based paint. One potential danger of an old crib is that it may be painted with a lead-based paint. Infants sometimes chew the slats of their cribs and, if consumed, lead-based paint is poisonous.

Keep plastic bags away from your infant. Young children can suffocate while playing with such bags.

Select blankets and pajamas that are fireproof.

Fasten mobiles securely. If there is a mobile over the crib, make sure that it is firmly secured and positioned well above the crib. If your child can reach the mobile, remove the mobile.

No small toys. Toys in the crib should be large and soft, with no sharp edges that can hurt your baby. Avoid stuffed animals or other toys with buttons or parts that can be swallowed.

Remember that every moment of the day, you are your child's protector. Be alert for hazards until your child learns safety rules (see Safety).

Keep your kitchen knives stored out of the reach of children, perhaps on a wall rack. When using them, hold the food you are cutting with your hand curled, not with your fingers extended.

Position pot and pan handles toward the back of the stove or counter. If they protrude over the front, a careless movement or a curious child could spill hot liquids or foods and cause burns. Always use a potholder or insulated gloves when handling heated pots, pans, trays, or other food containers.

Be careful to keep grease and drippings away from open flames. Keep curtains away from the stove.

In case of a small kitchen fire, use salt or baking soda to extinguish the flames. Do not throw water on them. Keep a fire extinguisher on hand for more serious fires.

Unplug appliances that are not in use; in particular irons, toasters, and food processors. Before inserting tools into a toaster, be sure it is unplugged. Before washing or cleaning any electrical device, unplug it.

### Microwave Oven Safety

Iron clothes on a well-balanced, sturdy surface covered with a fireproof material. Never leave a hot iron unattended.

Never leave small children alone in your kitchen.

Keep matches out of reach.

Store cleaning fluids and other chemicals in a high or locked cabinet.

Make it a habit to keep drawers and cupboards closed.

Be sure that all poisons are safely stored and clearly marked.

### Herbal Supplements: Natural Doesn't Mean Safe

## The Living Room.

If you have a fireplace, use a fire screen to prevent sparks from flying into the room.

Make sure no electrical cords cross the room. They can trip you or, if worn, can cause a fire.

If you have a humidifier to moisten the air in your home, wash the water reservoir thoroughly on a regular schedule (at least once every 2 weeks during the heating season and when it is emptied for the summer). Bacteria and fungi can grow in such moist environments and create a health hazard for you and your family. Fungicide tablets are available to help prevent this.

## The Bathrooms.

Never turn electrical switches on or off while you are in the bathtub or shower or standing on a damp floor. Do not use electrical appliances such as hair dryers or electric shavers when you are wet or in the shower or bathtub. Electrical shock or death from electrocution can result. Change all conventional bathroom outlets to ground-fault outlets. Building codes in many states require them in new construction.

Use nonslip mats in and adjacent to the shower or bathtub to prevent slips and falls. Grab rails also can prevent falls.

Never leave your baby or young child alone in the tub. He or she can drown in only a small amount of water.

Install a night-light in or adjacent to the bathroom.

Keep all medicines safely out of the reach of children.

Avoid discarding razor blades, hypodermic needles (for insulin or other shots), or other potentially dangerous goods into wastebaskets to which your child has access. Flush expired medications down the toilet.

## Bedrooms.

Have a lamp within reach on your bedside table. Keep your glasses at hand, too. A telephone within reach may be useful in an emergency, especially if you have a heart or other potentially debilitating chronic ailment. A special communication system also may be appropriate.

If young children visit your home, keep medications securely out of reach. For your own safety, and to avoid confusion, keep no more than one medication at your bedside.

Keep house keys on your bedside table or in an easy-to-reach, familiar place. Shoes and robe, too, should be easily available in the event you must leave quickly (such as in case of fire). This is also good practice when staying in a hotel or motel.

Never smoke in bed. Smoking in bed is particularly hazardous after drinking alcohol or when you are tired.

Unplug appliances (heating pads or electric blankets) when they are not in use.

## **Entrance and Stairway.**

All stairs should be in good repair; replace broken or cracked stairs outside and within your home.

Fasten carpeting on stairs securely.

Every stairway should have a sturdy railing.

Stairway and entryway lighting is very important: If the light is not bright enough to read in, improve the lighting. Place a switch at the bottom and top of each set of stairs.

To help prevent falls, never leave objects on stairs. Do not wax stairways or stair landings. Falls are of special concern to the elderly (see [How to Avoid Falls](#)).

## **The Basement, Garage, and Utility Room.**

Proper lighting is essential. Install appropriate lighting fixtures near the washing machine and dryer, workbench, and entrance areas.

Have your washing machine and dryer installed and serviced by a qualified electrician or technician. Follow factory instructions for use. Make sure that your dryer is vented. Both machines should be grounded; the area must not be damp or have standing water.

Keep cleaning fluids, paints and additives, and fuels and oils labeled and well out of the reach of children. Never reuse food containers to store toxic liquids; your child might take a sip out of a pop bottle that now contains paint thinner or some other poison.

If you have a workshop, keep it neat and organized. Wood shavings on the floor are a potential fire hazard. A clutter of tools and materials can result in falling or stumbling, doubly dangerous events in the presence of tools.

Wear proper attire when working. Safety glasses, earplugs, and protective clothing (including work shoes or boots) may help you avoid injury. Never wear a scarf or a shirt with sleeves that can become entangled in power tools.

Do not allow children to handle tools until they are old enough to understand and obey instructions regarding safe use. Limit use of most power tools to people over age 18.

Keep tools in good repair with blades sharp, cords intact, and guards in working order.

Place a fire extinguisher in the basement, workshop, or utility room. Check it periodically to make sure it is fully charged. Be familiar with instructions for its use.

## **Guns in Your Home**

If you have a rifle or shotgun for sporting purposes, make sure that it is stored without ammunition and in a locked storage cabinet. If you keep a weapon for security

reasons, be sure it is stored out of the reach of children.

Maintain the weapon carefully. Periodically, remove it from its place of storage and make sure that it is clean and working properly. Reacquaint yourself with the weapon's safety and with loading and unloading procedures.

(Note: We do not recommend the use of handguns or any other potentially lethal weapons for the purpose of home security.)