

FIRE SAFETY FOR THE ELDERLY

The majority of fire deaths in South Africa occur in the home and it's a common fact that people over the age of 65 have a greater chance of dying in a fire than any other age group.

The Western Cape Government Fire Brigade Services wants senior citizens and their caregivers to know that there are special precautions they can take to protect themselves and their homes from a fire.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISK

Why are the elderly at Risk?

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

What Fire Hazards Affect Older People?

- Cooking accidents are a major cause of fire-related injuries. The kitchen is one of the most active rooms in the home and therefore is potentially the most dangerous as well.
- The combination of alcohol use and smoking is a leading cause of fire deaths.
- Heating equipment is responsible for a big share of fires in seniors' homes. Extra caution should be used with heat sources such as wood, gas or electric heaters.
- Faulty wiring is another major cause of fires affecting the elderly. Older homes can have wiring problems and overloaded sockets.

SAFETY TIPS FOR THE ELDERLY

- **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, use a timer or take a spoon or oven gloves 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 an oil fire. Never use a stove to heat your home.
- **Heaters.**
Only buy heaters recognised by a national safety organisation, such as the SA Bureau of Standards (SABS) or LP Gas Safety Association. Only use the manufacturer's recommended fuel for each heater. Check your gas heater every year for leaks. Do not dry or store objects on top of your heater. Keep combustibles at least 1 metre away from all heat sources.

- **Smoking.**
Don't leave smoking materials unattended. Use "safety ashtrays" with wide edges. Empty all ashtrays into the toilet or a metal container every night before going to bed. Never smoke in bed and take special precautions if you are on medication that makes you drowsy.

INSTALL A SMOKE ALARM

A working smoke alarm doubles your chances of surviving a fire due to the early warning.

- Make sure smoke alarms are installed on each level of your home and outside all sleeping areas.
- Test them monthly and replace the batteries at least once a year.
- Caregivers are encouraged to check the smoke alarms of those who are unable to do it themselves.

PLAN & PRACTISE YOUR ESCAPE

It is vitally important to identify an escape plan and practise using it regularly. In the event of a fire, remember time is the biggest enemy and every second counts!

- If you live in a multi-story home or apartment building, it is in your best safety interests to sleep on the ground floor, ideally near an accessible exit.
- Plan and have at least two emergency exits for every room.
- If you use a walker or wheelchair, check all exits to make sure you can get through the doorways. If necessary, have a ramp available for emergency exits.
- Practice opening locked doors and security gates. Make sure burglar guards on windows can open from the inside.
- Keep a phone by your bed for emergency calls in case you become trapped and are unable to escape.
- Know which local emergency services are available and have those numbers visible and memorised.
- Be sure your physical address is clearly marked and visible from the street.
- When a fire occurs, do not waste any time saving property. Leave the home immediately and once outside, stay outside.

Finally, don't isolate yourself. Speak to your family members, building manager or neighbours about your fire safety plan and practise it with them every 6 months.

For more fire safety information please contact your local fire department.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

From your landline:

10177

From your cellphone:

112