

Fire Safety Tips for Protecting Elders

The other night at bedtime my seven-year-old daughter shared with me the fears that were keeping her up at night: demon ghost dogs, and **the fire she feared would consume the house**, starting with her room.

The demon ghost dog -- well, I won't bore you with the details of how he was dispatched (there's actually a special spray you can keep by your bed in a bottle, but never mind....). To allay her fear of fires, however, I walked her through the house, showing her the smoke alarms in each bedroom and the hallways, and the fire extinguisher we keep in the kitchen just in case.

I explained how the smoke alarms beep when the batteries get low, and how we always keep fresh batteries on hand to replace them. Mom and Dad, I reassured her, have things covered. After all, as her caregivers, that's our job.

Her timing couldn't have been better. **October, it turns out, is Fire Safety Month**, and as part of its campaign, **the Home Safety Council (HSC) is reaching out to older adults and their caregivers with tips and advice to help them prepare for and prevent home fires.**

This bit of news woke me up to the fact that my children aren't the only ones toward whom I have caregiving responsibility. As I assured my daughter that I'd covered all the bases, what about *my* parents, both of whom are over 80 and live alone?

Do they have smoke detectors in every room? What about the batteries? I certainly don't want them climbing on ladders by themselves to change them -- why wasn't I asking about this when I visited?

It's easy as the adult child of aging-in-place parents to overlook this kind of thing, especially when you've got parents like mine, whose houses are clean and well cared-for and who show no signs that their mental faculties are slipping.

So it was another wake-up call to learn from the HSC that despite the fact that home fires result in more than 3,400 deaths each year, only 37 percent of Americans have taken any steps to protect themselves against fires.

Here are some of the steps they recommend, for your own home and for the seniors you're caring for:

Install and test smoke alarms:

- **Install smoke alarms on every level of the home**, including the basement. Install additional smoke alarms inside all bedrooms.
- **Test each smoke alarm every month.** Push the test button until you hear the alarm.
- **Put new batteries in smoke alarms at least once each year**, and any time the alarm signals low battery power (typically a chirping noise).
- **Use interconnected smoke alarms.** Interconnected alarms are linked together so that if one alarm detects a fire, they all signal together.
- **If smoke alarms are 8-10 years old, get new ones.**

Plan and practice a fire drill:

- **Make a fire escape plan for everyone in the home.** Sketch out a map of the home, including all rooms, windows, interior and exterior doors, stairways, fire escapes, and smoke alarms.
- **Make sure windows and doorways open easily and unlock easily from the inside**, without a key. Stairs and doorways should never be blocked.
- **Find two ways out of every room -- the door and perhaps the window.** You might need an escape ladder to get out of upstairs windows. If so, they should be part of your fire drill.
- **Many older adults will need help escaping a fire. Plan for this.** If anyone in the household has a hearing impairment, purchase special smoke alarms that use strobes and/or vibrations to signal a fire.
- **Hold fire drills frequently** and at various times until the escape plans become second nature.

Implementing these recommendations in my own home seems like a great idea. But I feel overwhelmed just thinking about trying to get my parents on board -- especially the thought of my deaf, arthritic, 87-year-old dad trying to get himself out of a window in the middle of the night.

That's why I found this additional information from the HSC particularly **intriguing**: Home fire sprinkler systems -- which detect the heat from fires and automatically douse the flames within seconds -- are the best protection on the market, yet only 41 percent of adults even know they exist.

Count me in the ignorant 59 percent. But apparently the local fire department can help me find someone in my parents' area (and my own) who's qualified to install a home sprinkler system.

Given the challenges involved in getting an elderly person living alone out the door in a fire -- and the importance of remembering everyone in my caregiving circle as Fire Safety Month (and my daughter) remind me of this important family safety issue -- putting a damper on a fire before it gets out of hand sounds like a pretty great idea.

Courtesy: <http://www.caring.com/blogs/caring-currents/helping-seniors-with-fire-safety-issues>