

Proven Need for Fire Safety Awareness among Older Adults

Statistics show that home fires, from a variety of causes, result in a significant number of deaths and injuries each year. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), U.S. fire departments responded to an estimated average of 371,700 home structure fires per year during the five-year-period of 2006-2010. These fires caused an estimated average of 2,590 civilian deaths and 12,910 civilian injuries.



Older adults are burdened with the gravest fire risk. Adults over 65 have the highest risk of death from fire, and this risk increases with age. During 2003-2007, 28% of the people fatally injured in home fires were 65 or older, but only 12% of the population was that old. They faced a risk more than twice that of the general population. For those 75 and over, the risk is 2.8 times higher. While only 2% of the population was 85 or older, 6% of the home fire deaths were in this age group, giving these elders a risk 3.7 times the general population. As baby boomers enter retirement age, the United States Fire Administration (USFA) has predicted that the percentage of older Americans will increase significantly, thus making a corresponding increase in fire deaths and injuries among older adults probable.

Year after year, cooking equipment, heating equipment and electrical distribution/lighting equipment continue to be among the leading causes of unintentional home structure fires. In all, 65% of home fires are attributed to these three causes. During 2005-2009, people ages 75-84 had a risk of dying in a home structure fire that involved cooking equipment that was twice that of the general population. People 85 and older had an even higher relative risk of death in these fires. In home fires caused by heating equipment, adults over the age of 75 have twice the risk of dying in a fire. Adults over the age of 75 also have a higher risk of dying in fires caused by electrical distribution and lighting equipment. It is possible that older adults have remained in the same home for an extended period of time, which might suggest that wiring within the home is older and may be at fault. Electrical distribution and lighting equipment home fires have been shown to increase in frequency with increasing dwelling age.

Physical disability, which may accompany increasing age, is also a contributing factor to death or injury by fire. As age of victim increases, physical disabilities are cited much more frequently than other factors. When physical disability was a factor, three out of every five fire victims were over the age of 65.

These statistics are even more disturbing when you consider that many of these fires could be prevented. ESFI strives to increase awareness of the elevated fire risk experienced by older adults. This heightened awareness among older adults, their families and caregivers is the key to reducing home fires and preventing deaths.

Risk of Dying in a Home Structure Fire (2005-2009)

