

Don't take chances — be fire-safety savvy

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According to statistics from the U.S. Fire Administration, there were 410,000 reported residential fires in 2004. These fires resulted in 3,225 deaths and more than \$5 million in damage.

With this in mind, here is a list of five common causes of house fires and what homeowners can do to prevent them.

Cooking

By far the most common cause of house fires is cooking. Typically, fires result when people become distracted or leave the house while food is cooking. To avoid cooking-related fires, take the following precautions:

- 1 Create a child-free zone around stoves and ovens. Many fires result from children turning on cooking appliances when adults are not present.
- 2 Keep all rags, pot holders and other combustibles away from cooking surfaces.
- 3 Never leave cooking unattended. Simple tasks like answering the door or the telephone can distract you long enough for food to overheat or boil over, resulting in a fire.

Heating

Fires caused by heating can result from both central furnaces and space heaters. A few simple precautions can drastically reduce the chances of fire.

- 1 Have your central heating system serviced and inspected by a licensed [heating and cooling](#) (HVAC) contractor yearly. This will help ensure that your furnace is safe.
- 2 Never place space heaters less than 4 feet away from combustibles like curtains, carpets or furniture.
- 3 Always turn space heaters off when you leave the house or go to bed.

Candles

Along with the increased popularity of [candles](#) has come an increase in the number of house fires caused by their use. However, candles can be safe if used with caution.

- 1 Always install candles in sturdy holders so they do not tip over onto combustible surfaces.
- 2 Never leave burning candles unattended. It takes just seconds for a fire to spread out of control.
- 3 Stop using candles when they have an inch left. Melting the bottom of the wax may allow the lighted wick to fall out of the candle.

Smoking

Despite warnings from the surgeon general, many people still smoke. Fires related to smoking are the leading cause of fire deaths. Follow these rules to help prevent smoking related fires:

1 Never smoke in bed. People fall asleep while smoking and the fire gets out of control before they are awakened.

2 If possible, do not allow smoking in the house. In most cases it is easy to step outside when you need to smoke.

3 If you allow smoking in the house, check for burning embers or cigarette or cigar butts in furniture or on the floor before leaving the house or going to bed.

Electrical

Electrical fires can result from unsafe workmanship or defective appliances. A yearly inspection around the house can help prevent electrical fires.

1 Most people never consider hiring an electrician to periodically inspect their homes for safety. However, this can be a relatively inexpensive way to detect unsafe wiring or wiring practices before they result in fire or shock.

2 Inspect extension cords before you use them. If the plastic sheathing is frayed, throw the cord away.

3 If an extension cord feels hot while in use, replace it with a new cord.

4 Never use extension cords for large appliances like washer and dryers or refrigerators. It is safer to have a licensed electrician install a new outlet close to the appliance.

Protection

Despite caution, house fires do occur. Here are some simple steps to help protect yourself in a fire.

1 Have properly operating smoke detectors installed as required by local codes.

2 Have one or more fully charged fire extinguishers readily available.

3 Have a means of escape (window or second door) if a fire occurs that blocks the primary door.

4 Create and practice a plan of escape for your family.

For additional information on fires and fire prevention, visit the U.S. Fire Administration Web site at www.usfa.fema.gov or call 301-447-1000.

Do you have a home repair question? Send e-mail to Ask the Inspector at H&G@ajc.com.