

HOME CARE BRIEFING®

HCB 2018 ISSUE 4

Fire Safety: Strategies to Protect Clients and Reduce Exposure

According to the National Fire Protection Association, a house fire occurs every 88 seconds in the United States. In 2017, such fires were responsible for 2,630 deaths, as well as 10,600 injuries. The U.S. Fire Administration notes that seniors are especially vulnerable, as individuals age 65 and older are two-and-a-half times more likely to die in a fire than the population as a whole.

These statistics indicate that, for home and personal care providers, maintaining a safe environment involves more than preventing falls, cuts, burns and other household accidents that imperil clients' health and well-being, and may prevent them from continuing to live independently. Home caregivers also must be cognizant of the threat of fire in clients' residences and trained in both fire prevention and emergency response. Organizations that lack an adequate fire safety and emergency management plan are vulnerable to disaster-related liabilities, including lawsuits claiming improper staffing levels, negligent training or client abandonment, among other allegations. They are also exposed to reputational harm and financial losses related to disruption of clinical practice and business operations.

This issue of *Home Care Briefing* focuses on the types of fires that pose the greatest danger to seniors and offers practical protective measures for clients and family members. By taking proper precautions, planning for an emergency and educating clients about hazards, home care providers can significantly reduce the risk and consequences of a potentially deadly and damaging fire.

Did someone forward this newsletter to you? If you would like to receive future issues of *Home Care Briefing*® by email, please register for a complimentary subscription at go.cna.com/HCSubscribe.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Fire spreads fast. A small blaze can become an inferno in less than 30 seconds, engulfing a structure in flames and filling it with thick black smoke. The combination of extreme, lung-scorching heat – up to 600 degrees Fahrenheit at eye level, much hotter than at floor level – and darkness due to billowing clouds of toxic fumes can disorient and panic clients even in their own homes.

The U.S. Fire Administration notes that seniors are especially vulnerable, as individuals 65 and older are two-and-a-half times more likely to die in a fire than the population as a whole.

A house fire can begin in many ways. Among the most common sources of fires are cooking implements, smoking materials, fireplaces, space heaters, candles, and electrical appliances and wiring. The following preventive strategies, which should be both followed by caregivers and communicated to clients and family members, are organized by cause of fire:

Cooking:

- Never leave anything cooking on the stove unattended for any length of time.
- Do not overheat grease or oil; turn heat off immediately if oil begins to smoke.
- Keep potholders and towels away from heating elements, as well as curtains and other flammable items.
- Always wear short or tight-fitting sleeves when cooking, as loose sleeves may catch fire.
- Double-check that the oven, stove and other cooking implements are off prior to going to bed or leaving the home.
- Do not use an oven or range to heat the home, as this practice can create both fire and gas inhalation risks.

Smoking:

- Never leave a lit cigarette unattended; many fires start this way.
- Do not smoke in bed or when feeling drowsy.
- Use deep ashtrays rather than plastic cups or other meltable or flammable receptacles.
- Ensure that cigarette butts are fully extinguished. Never toss smoldering items on the ground or into a trash can.
- Do not empty ashtrays or other cigarette butt receptacles into the trash if the butts were recently extinguished.
- Require disabled or elderly clients to use smoking aprons to avoid accidentally setting clothing on fire.

Among the most common sources of fires are cooking implements, smoking materials, fireplaces, space heaters, candles, and electrical appliances and wiring.

Fireplaces/space heaters:

- Place a screen in front of fireplaces to contain flying sparks and rolling logs.
- Keep all flammable materials a safe distance away from open flame or heating elements.
- Regularly maintain chimneys to ensure safe ventilation and prevent buildup of potentially hazardous creosote.
- Burn only wood or other appropriate fuel in fireplaces. Do not use fireplaces for disposing of trash.
- Check space heater placement to ensure there is adequate space between the unit and all potentially combustible materials.
- Ensure that space heaters have an automatic shutoff mechanism, which can prevent accidents if a heater should overheat or tip over.

Candles:

- Use flashlights instead of candles during power outages.
- Blow out candles when leaving the room or going to bed, and do not permit candles to be used in bedrooms.
- Place candles on a level surface at least 12 inches from anything flammable.
- Oxygen tanks and open flames are a bad combination; do not allow clients who use oxygen to light candles.

Electrical equipment/wiring:

- Avoid use of extension cords and multiple sockets. If they must be used, check cords for signs of fraying and be careful not to overload circuits.
- Ensure that all electrical appliances are in good working order, replacing any that are damaged or outdated.
- Check that new electrical equipment is approved by a reputable testing organization and has basic safety features, such as automatic shutoff.
- Hire a licensed electrician to inspect wiring and circuit breakers, especially in older homes where wiring has not been updated recently.

FIRE SAFETY PLANNING/PREPARATION

The following general fire safety measures complement the source-specific actions listed above, helping to prevent house fires and save lives in the event of an emergency:

- **Ensure that smoke, heat and carbon monoxide detectors are installed throughout the house**, and that batteries are changed and device functioning checked on a regular basis, possibly when setting clocks forward or back in spring and fall.
- **Keep a fire extinguisher in the kitchen** and check it regularly.
- **Remind clients to inspect clothing dryer vents periodically** and clean dryer filters after each use.
- **Develop a fire safety plan for each client.** The plan should emphasize the need to escape first and *then* call for help; to crawl low under the smoke and intense heat; and to keep airways covered, if possible, by wrapping a towel or clothing around mouth and nose.
- **Designate at least two escape routes** from each room in the house.
- **Regularly review these exit routes with clients and family members**, ensuring that everyone knows exactly where to go even if rooms and hallways are obscured by smoke.
- **Clear escape routes of any obstacles** that might impede a rapid evacuation in dark and chaotic conditions.
- **Establish an exterior meeting location** where all occupants will gather after evacuating the house to verify their safety.
- **Conduct periodic fire drills** with clients and family members, emphasizing escape routes, meeting locations and calling 911.

Fire safety awareness is an important responsibility of home care providers. By identifying and communicating hazards, taking appropriate preventive actions, and establishing sound response plans, caregivers can prevent or mitigate harm to clients, family members and themselves, while simultaneously minimizing liability exposures for their organizations.



For more information, please call us at 866-262-0540 or visit www.cna.com/healthcare.