



ELDER HEALTH TIPS



A Joint Publication of the Unintentional Injury Prevention Program
 and the Office of Elder Health
 Bureau of Family and Community Health
 Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Fire and Fall Prevention: A Necessity for Older People

Each year many elders die or experience permanent disability, loss of mobility, and decreased independence after a home fire or fall. **Unintentional injury prevention** is a critically important component of good health for older adults.

Oftentimes simple changes in daily routine or the layout of the home can help prevent injury, disability, or death.

How did your grandmother treat a burn when you were a child? How did you heat your home? Or light it? What kinds of shoes did you wear when you were growing up? Why are you being asked all these questions? I am asking you to “remember when” to make an important point. Things are different today from when you were a child – in many, many ways.

One important way things have changed is that we’ve gotten smarter about home safety. Yet, death and injury from home fires and falls are a major, and growing, national problem for older adults. At age 65,

individuals are twice as likely as the population at large to be killed or injured by fires or falls. By age 75 the risk increases to three times that of the general population – four times at age 85.

In 1998, about 13% of the Commonwealth's population was over age 65, yet 87% of deaths resulting from a fall and 36% of civilian fire deaths occurred in Massachusetts residents over age 65!

The risk of death from a fire or fall is especially high for the oldest women in Massachusetts. Over half of the all the fire and fall fatalities in women of all ages in 1998 occurred in women aged 85 and over!

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), have developed some key messages that seniors should *remember when* going about their daily activities in order to reduce their risk and continue to live safely and successfully at home.

Fire Safety:

- Provide smokers with large, deep ashtrays. Wet butts and ashes before emptying ashtrays. NEVER smoke in bed or while drowsy.
- Give space heaters space. Keep them at least 3 feet away from anything that can burn – including you. Unplug them when not in use.
- Be kitchen wise. Wear tight-fitting or rolled-up sleeves when cooking. NEVER leave cooking unattended. If a pan of food catches fire, slide a lid over it and turn off the burner.
- Stop, drop, and roll. If your clothing catches on fire: stop (don't run), drop gently to the ground, cover your face with your hands, and roll over and over to smother the flames. If you cannot do that, smother the flames with a towel or blanket. Immerse burns in cool water only for 10 to 15 minutes.
- Smoke alarms save lives. Have smoke alarms installed outside all sleeping areas and on every level of your home. Test monthly and replace the battery annually.

- Plan and practice your escape route. Know two ways out of every room in your home. In a fire, get out and stay out.
- Know your local emergency number (911). Call AFTER you've escaped from your home.
- Plan your escape around your abilities. Have a telephone in your bedroom so you can call if you become trapped.

Fall Prevention:

- Exercise regularly to build strength and improve balance and coordination. Ask your doctor about the best exercise for you.
- Take your time. Being rushed or distracted greatly increases your chance of falling. Get your balance when first standing up.
- Clear the way. Keep stairs and walkways clear of clutter and phone and electrical cords.
- Look out for yourself. See an eye specialist once a year. Poor vision can increase your chance of falling. Improve the lighting in your home. Install a night light between the bedroom and bathroom. Turn on the lights before using the stairs.

- Slippery when wet. Use non-slip mats in the tub/shower. Install grab bars in tub and near toilet.
- Throw rugs can throw you. Use only throw rugs with rubber, non-skid backing.
- Tread carefully. Stairways should be well lit from both top and bottom. Have easy-to-grip handrails on both sides of the whole staircase.
- Best foot forward. Wear sturdy, well-fitted, low-heeled shoes with non-slip soles. These are safer than high-heels, thick-soled athletic shoes, slippers or stocking feet.

Making a few small changes in our lifestyle and in our homes can make such a big difference!

This material was taken from: The National Fire Protection Association, *Remembering When: a fire and fall prevention program for older adults.*

Fire death data taken from: *The Massachusetts Fire Problem: 1998 Annual Report of the State Fire Marshall*. Injury death data taken from: *Advance Data Deaths 1998, Massachusetts Department of Public Health*.

April 2000

For information on elder health, injury prevention, and fire safety resources, contact:

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)

One Batterymarch Park, PO Box 9101
Quincy, MA 02269-9101

Tel: 800-344-3555

Fax: 617-770-0700

Office of Elder Health

Mass. Department of Public Health
250 Washington Street, 4th floor
Boston, MA 02108-4619

Tel: 617-624-5070

Fax: 617-624-5075

TTY: 617-624-5992

Unintentional Injury Prevention Program

Mass. Department of Public Health
250 Washington Street, 4th floor
Boston, MA 02108-4619

Tel: 617-624-5070

Fax: 617-624-5075

TTY: 617-624-5992

This Elder Advisory was prepared with the assistance of: Ruth Grabel, Office of Elder Health and Kathy Stimson at the Unintentional Injury Prevention Program at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and the National Fire Protection Association.

Due to a limited supply, we ask you to make as many copies of this Elder Advisory as needed.