

Seniors & Fire

Approximately 35 million Americans are aged 65 years and older. They represent 14% of the population, the highest percentage in history. And by 2050, they are expected to make up 20% of the population - 80 million people. The fastest-growing age group of all is people aged 85 years and older.

This growing segment of the population is also especially vulnerable to injury and death from fire. While the National Fire Death Rate for the general population is 15 fire deaths per million, the rate for those aged 65-69 years is 20 per million, for those aged 75-79 years is 33 per million, and for those aged 85+ years is 50 per million. Fire and burns are the leading cause of unintentional injury deaths for older Americans.

The most recent statistics available show that the share of home fire deaths accounted for by adults aged 65 and older increased from 19% to 31% from 1980 to 1999. And while the numbers of deaths and injuries during this period declined for most age groups, injuries for those aged 75 and over increased (Characteristics of Home Fire Victims, John Hall, National Fire Protection Association, May 2004).

- A complex mix of risk factors contribute to seniors' vulnerability:
- Diminished level of awareness of danger, due to such factors as dementia/neurological disorders, medication, and/or alcohol;
- Smoking (the leading cause of fire-related deaths for seniors);
- Use of alternative heat sources such as space heaters and electric blankets (the second leading cause);
- Disabilities including hearing, vision, and mobility loss;
- Sensory impairments or diminished sense of pain, resulting in delays in treatment for burns
- Difficulty performing household fire safety measures such as changing batteries in smoke alarms.

For adults 65 and older, the leading causes of fire deaths and injuries are:

1. Smoking (30.1% of all fire-related deaths)
2. Heating equipment (16.9% of all fire-related deaths)
3. Cooking (11.1% of all fire-related deaths)

For more information:

www.nfpa.org Research & Reports section for Home Safety fact sheets on: Cooking safety; Smoking material-related fires; and Fire safety for the deaf or hard-of-hearing

www.redcross.org/services for the American Red Cross' Disaster Preparedness for Seniors by Seniors

www.usfa.fema.gov/50plus/ for fire safety facts and tips for people 50+ years old