

NFPA study shows a 15% increase in candle fires from 2000 to 2001, triple the number in 1990

September 20, 2004 – New data from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) show that candles are becoming an increasingly prevalent cause of home fires. Candles started fires in 18,000 homes in 2001, a 15 percent rise from 2000, and more than triple the number in 1990.

After declining from 1980 to 1990, candle-related home fires started increasing in 1991, and since 1995, each year has seen a new high in the number of fires blamed on candles. In 2001, candle fires in the home were responsible for an estimated 190 civilian deaths, 1,450 civilian injuries and \$265 million in property damage.

What underlies this devastation? First, candles have become more popular: According to the National Candle Association, seven out of 10 households use candles. Second, many people don't realize how quickly something can go wrong, and don't know the rules for safe candle use. One-third of these fires occurred after candles were left unattended, abandoned or inadequately controlled. One-quarter occurred when combustible material came too close to the flame. And 6 percent were started by people—usually children—playing with the candle.

Another important factor may be poverty. As many as one-third of people killed in candle fires were using them for light because their power had been shut off.

Even as candle-caused fires increase, the number of home fires is dropping. So the proportion of home fires related to candles has been growing, according to the NFPA study. In 2001, candle fires accounted for 4.7 percent of home fires, compared with 1.1 percent in the early 1980s.

Four out of 10 candle fires start in the bedroom, and one in six start in common rooms, living rooms, family rooms or dens. Nearly half the people killed by candle fires in the home were younger than 20; children ages 5 to 9 accounted for a disproportionate share of the victims, with a candle-fire death rate 2.5 times higher than the general population.

Candle fires are most common in December, perhaps because candles are frequently a part of holiday decorating and rituals. Eleven percent of the candle fires in December started when decorations were ignited.

The NFPA offers these tips for safe candle use:

- Extinguish all candles when leaving the room or going to sleep.
- Keep candles away from things that can catch fire, such as clothing, books, paper, curtains, Christmas trees, or decorations.
- Place candles on stable furniture in sturdy holders that won't tip over and that are big enough to collect dripping wax.
- Don't place lit candles in windows, where they may ignite blinds or curtains.
- Place candles only in areas where they won't be knocked over by children or pets.
- Extinguish taper and pillar candles when they get within two inches of the holder or decorative material. Extinguish votive and filled candles before the last half-inch of wax starts to melt.
- Avoid candles with combustible materials embedded in them, or with holders or decorations that could ignite.
- Don't allow children or teens to have candles in their bedrooms.

Holiday decorating & lighting

- Use caution with holiday decorations and whenever possible, choose those made with flame-resistant, flame-retardant or non-combustible materials.
- Keep [candles](#) away from decorations and other combustible materials, and do not use candles to decorate [Christmas trees](#).

- Purchase only lights and electrical decorations bearing the name of an independent testing lab, and follow the manufacturer's instructions for installation and maintenance.
- Carefully inspect new and previously used light strings and replace damaged items before plugging lights in. Do not overload extension cords.
- Always unplug lights before replacing light bulbs or fuses.
- Don't mount lights in any way that can damage the cord's wire insulation (i.e., using clips, not nails).
- Keep children and pets away from light strings and electrical decorations.
- Turn off all light strings and decorations before leaving the house or going to bed.

Holiday entertaining

- Unattended [cooking](#) is the leading cause of home fires in the U.S. When cooking for holiday visitors, remember to keep an eye on the range.
- Provide plenty of large, deep ashtrays and check them frequently. Cigarette butts can smolder in the trash and cause a fire, so completely douse cigarette butts with water before discarding.
- After a party, always check on, between and under upholstery and cushions and inside trash cans for cigarette butts that may be smoldering.
- Keep matches and lighters up high, out of sight and reach of children (preferably in a locked cabinet). When smokers visit your home, ask them to keep their smoking materials with them so young children do not touch them.
- Test your smoke alarms, and let guests know what your [fire escape plan](#) is.