

Fire safety more critical as people age

By Teri Mizuhara

There are an estimated 75 million baby boomers in the United States who began turning 65 at the rate of one every 10 seconds in 2011. They make up 13 percent of the U.S. population.

Boomers have redefined what a senior is. They are physically active, healthier, focused on their futures with the same passion and energy they had 30 or 40 years ago. Life is good until you talk about seniors and their risk of injury or death due to fire.

Hard facts:

- If you are between the ages of 65 and 74, your risk of dying in a fire is two times that of the general population.
- If you are between the ages of 75 and 84, your risk of dying in a fire is three times that of the general population.
- If you are 85 years or older, your risk of dying in a fire is 4.4 times that of the general population.
- In 2007, seniors represented 13 percent of the population, but were 30 percent of those who were killed in fires.

As we age, our vision, hearing, sense of smell-taste, and even our response to pain change. We may have mobility challenges, and because of medications, our mental and physical abilities can be affected.

The fix:

Think about what you are doing. So often we do things by rote

or autopilot; we do it the way we have been doing it for decades or longer. We don't focus our attention on what we do every day and that is where trouble can occur.

Here are some pointers:

- Never leave food cooking on the stove, in the oven, or on the barbecue because cooking fires are the No. 1 cause of house fires. If you must leave, take a timer (they are now made with belt clips or lanyards) or your cooking implement such as a spoon or spatula with you to remind yourself you left food cooking.
- If you smoke, do so outside and have a pail of water or sand to put out your cigarette or cigar. Never smoke in bed or sitting on a sofa or recliner; the risk of falling asleep is too great.
- If you are on oxygen therapy, do not smoke. Last year in Oroville a woman caught herself on fire because she was smoking while on oxygen. People living nearby heard her screams and found her fully engulfed in flames.
- If you use space heaters, make sure they are in good working condition and those flammable materials such as curtains or blankets are a minimum of 3 feet away.
- Do not burn candles or incense, they are too easily forgotten and can quickly cause a deadly fire. There are battery-operated candles and fragrance sticks that do not require fire and they can be found at local discount dollar stores.
- Make sure your smoke detectors and carbon monoxide alarms are placed properly in your home (bedrooms, hallways and on every level) and that they are replaced every 10 years. They should be linked and there are detectors for those that have vision or hearing issues. Remember to have your smoke detector and carbon monoxide alarm batteries once a year.

Taking a minute or two to seriously consider what you are doing, the risks associated with that activity and maybe changing the way you do it, could be lifesaving. Finding a fresh approach to an old habit may not only make that activity safer, but it may also breathe some new life into something you took for granted.

Seniors are a treasured population and we need to help keep them safe. With a little time and energy, we can all make sure that is a reality.

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