

Fire Safety: A Major Concern for College-Bound Students

The South Carolina State Fire Marshal's Office, along with the National Association of State Fire Marshals and the Center for Campus Fire Safety recognize the importance of fire safety for students living both on- and off-campus. Additionally, South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford proclaimed September 2010, as Campus Fire Safety Month and also addresses the importance of educating our students about fire safety to help ensure their security during their college years and beyond. During 2009, South Carolina fire departments responded to over 800 emergency calls to colleges, and nationally, 102 people have lost their lives in campus-related fires since January, 2000. Leading causes of fires in both on- and off-campus residences are associated with the usage of candles, careless cooking and careless smoking. Paying attention to a few simple precautions could mean the difference between life and death.

Candles: Although many higher education facilities have already banned the use of candles in on-campus housing, many college students are living off-campus. Students reside in one- and two-family dwellings and apartment buildings, which places them in a high-risk category. Whether living on- or off-campus, students should be aware of these safety tips:

- Extinguish all candles when leaving the room or going to sleep. Candle fires often occur when left unattended or while people are asleep.
- Keep candles away from things that can catch fire, such as clothing, books, paper, curtains, Christmas trees or decorations, and don't place lit candles in windows, where they may ignite blinds or curtains. Candles don't spread the fire, it is what they ignite that spreads the fire.
- Place candles on stable furniture in sturdy holders that won't tip over and that are big enough to collect dripping wax. Place candles only in areas where they won't be knocked over by children or pets. If a candle gets knocked over, it can ignite other combustibles such as furniture, papers, blankets, etc.
- Avoid candles with combustible materials embedded in them, or with holders or decorations that could ignite. A candle with materials embedded in them may look pretty, but could possibly ignite and spread the fire beyond the candle.
- Use globes to cover the flame. Better yet, consider battery-powered flameless candles.

Cooking Safety: According to the United States Fire Administration, cooking fires are the number one cause of fire injury on college campuses.

- Follow the dormitory rules regarding possession and use of cooking appliances.
- Use cooking appliances correctly. Never overload electrical outlets or extension cords.
- Pay attention when cooking. Don't get sidetracked or leave cooking unattended.

- Move items such as potholders or dishtowels away from cooking surfaces.
- Applying a lid to a small grease fire is usually the most effective and safest method of controlling it. Trying to carry a pan that's on fire is extremely dangerous because it can ignite clothes or spill, causing severe burns.

Smoking Combined with Alcohol and/or Other Drugs Could Prove Deadly: “Most people are aware that smoking is bad for the health of the smoker and for the health of people around the smoker, but one of the dangers that people often forget is the relationship between smoking and the potential for fire, especially when combined with alcohol or other drugs,” says **John Reich, South Carolina State Fire Marshal**. Studies have shown that more than half of all alcohol-impaired fire deaths were the result of fires caused by careless smoking. If you must smoke, only smoke outside of the building and encourage others to do the same. Reduce the chances of smoking-related fires by:

- Providing a deep-dish ashtray with a solid base, never allowing it to rest on the arm of upholstered furniture
- Dousing cigarettes or ashtray contents with water before disposing of them in the trash
- Being especially careful if alcohol or other drugs are also being used while smoking
- Never allowing family members or guests to smoke in bed

Having working smoke alarms and an emergency escape plan should be a priority for everyone. “For maximum protection, consider residing in fire sprinklered occupancies. These systems quickly control the fire causing little or no damage, preventing the loss of life and property,” **Mr. Reich added**.