

## 10-10-08 Fire Prevention Week

This is National Fire Prevention week and the timing is just right. As the migrating birds and butterflies say goodbye, the leaves are just beginning to blush while the birth of another autumn delivers our first chilly air. And during the first week of October don't we find ourselves asking those perennial questions, "Shall I turn on the heat or put on a sweatshirt?" "What's for supper? Is it something warm?"

As the temperatures drop, we begin to desire warm comfort foods and we scan our surroundings for signs of cocooning readiness. Blankets, throws, sweaters, slippers: Check. Into storage go the cool blues and greens as they trade decorating places with warm gold, rust, cranberry and orange: Check. Firewood for the fireplace and candles for ambience: Check. Well, maybe, or maybe not.

This year is different. Record numbers of families have lost their homes to foreclosure, jobs are fewer and everything costs more because of the high gas prices. We, unlike the banks, will not be receiving a bailout. During times such as these, the chances of fires are greater because some people cannot afford to have professional safety and maintenance checks, such as chimney cleanings. More turn to the use of space heaters, as they attempt to heat only a small part of their home. Others look to saving electricity and brightening their moods with the lighting of candles. After Christmas and New Year's, Halloween is the next top day for home fires resulting from candles.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, falling asleep was a factor in 12% of home candle fires and 26% of the associated deaths in 2005. This is why it is recommended to never use candles in the bedroom or anywhere people are likely to fall asleep. For this Halloween and holiday season, consider getting a few battery operated "candles". You don't want to discover the definition of clothing, as my sister, Carole did, several decades ago. After her honeymoon candle lit house fire, where she and her husband "barely" escaped with nothing but their lives, she asked me if I knew the definition of clothing. I did not. "Something newlyweds keep under the bed in case of fire." I laughed at the time but, in reality, clothing won't help you at all. Fire prevention is the first and best defense, a plan for fire escape is the second and thirdly, are methods of extinguishing fires.

At a recent health agent's meeting, we shared our concerns as we predicted an increase in unsafe alternatives to home heating. I recalled, as all health agents can, home inspections where I discovered numerous attached extension cords, lying under rugs, boxes and piles of papers, leading to the space heaters, some intended for well-ventilated areas only. I recall the woman who, reading my mind as she saw my eyes spot the electric space heater, attached to several extension cords, all underneath piles of combustibles, said, "Oh, I never leave the room when that is on! I only use it when I am sitting in that chair." I was thinking, "Elderly people frequently fall asleep in chairs just like that." I also recall old Mr. W's answer when I asked him why his gas stovetop burner was lighted if he wasn't cooking, "Oh," he said nonchalantly, "just to take the chill off." Then there was the elderly gentleman who had no heat at all except for the electric blanket on his bed. I saw my breath form in the cold air of his house. He told me he "was just fine". The elderly can be very stoic in these circumstances. It is an admirable attitude but stoicism and stupidity can go hand in hand.

The statistics tell us that cooking related fires are most prevalent, followed by heating and then those from candles. They all share, in particular, two components: unattended fires/falling asleep and proximity of combustibles near the heat source. I find that interesting because these fires could “easily” be prevented by behavior modification. Don’t leave fires, stoves or candles unattended. Don’t keep the oven mitt or the newspaper near the stove, for example.

However, the solution is not as simple as educate people and all good things will follow. When people have to choose between food or the heating bill, they might just choose to eat and get by with that electric blanket and little space heater, with full knowledge that this may not be safe. These socioeconomic, psychological and age-related circumstances require compassionate responses to basic human needs, municipal teamwork, political and financial support and a society that does not forget its elders. (I hope my children are listening! Mom’s time is right around the corner!) As to those who are capable of working, they always need, but now more than in a very long time, a work ethic that demands looking for opportunity and doing what needs to be done.

Let’s watch out for each other. If you know of someone who needs assistance in keeping warm this winter or who may risking his or her safety in their home setting due to financial hardship or any other reason, call me, call your church minister, call your Council on Aging, call your Fire Department. We will do what we can do.

Will you need help with your heating bill this winters? Apply for fuel assistance. To locate sources, call the National Energy Assistance Referral line at 1 866 674-6327.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She has Raynauds, giving her very cold fingertips while typing this. Any suggestions? She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*