

Tips for creating a 'Home Safe Home'

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Home. A haven of comfort. A refreshing and cozy place. A happy place. But also a potentially dangerous place. A place where home-related accidents result in nearly 20,000 deaths and 21 million injuries requiring medical attention each year.

Whether you live in an apartment, a single-family home, a mobile home or a townhouse, your residence is jam-packed with potentially life-threatening accidents waiting to happen. In fact, the death rate from home-related injuries has risen 30 percent since 1992.

According to the Home Safety Council, a national organization dedicated solely to preventing home-related injuries, the top five causes of accidental injury and death in America's homes are falls, poisonings, fires and burns, choking and drowning, in that order. According to a Home Safety Council study, most people — a whopping 92 percent — said they consider their homes to be their "safe haven," says the organization's Angela Mickalide, "yet the number of unintentional deaths and injuries that occur at home each year belies that misconception."

Accidents can happen anywhere in and around your home, but safety experts say bathrooms and kitchens, where the top hazards run rampant, are the most dangerous rooms in America's homes. What to do? A few preventive steps can go a long way toward making you feel a lot safer at home.



FIRES & BURNS

In 2005, U.S. fire departments responded to 396,000 home fires, which claimed the lives of 3,030 people and injured another 13,825. The kitchen is the setting for most cooking fires, which are the No. 1 cause of home fires and home fire injuries in the United States.

To keep your family safe, stay by the stove when cooking, especially when frying food. Keep space heaters at least three feet away from anything that can burn, and have working smoke alarms in your house. The National Fire Prevention Association recommends that you test your smoke alarms once a month and follow the manufacturer's instructions.



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Burns happen in bathrooms, too. Elderly people and young children, because their skin is thin, are at the highest risk for scalding burns in the bathtub. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends water heater thermostats be set no higher than 120 degrees.

CHOKING

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 160 children younger than 15 died from choking in 2000, and for every choking-related death, there are more than 100 visits to emergency departments.

Anything that can fit through a toilet paper tube can cause a young child to choke, so keep coins, latex balloons, small balls and foods such as hard candy, hot dogs, grapes, popcorn and peanuts out of reach. Also, always place children to sleep on their backs, and don't place pillows or comforters in their cribs. Clip the loops in window cords and place them up high where children can't reach them.

Read the labels on toys, especially if they have small parts, and be sure your child is old enough to play with them. The Consumer Product Safety Commission Web site at www.cpsc.gov provides information about toys that can injure your child.

DROWNINGS

One-third of accidental home drownings occur in bathtubs. Among infants, half of drownings in the home occur in bathtubs, but even toilets can be fatal attractions to toddlers.

Never leave a child unsupervised in the bathtub — not even to go get a towel! A child can drown in the blink of an

>> For more home safety tips and information, visit www.homesafetycouncil.org or www.cdc.gov

eye, so let phones and doorbells ring away while your child is in the tub. If you absolutely must leave the room, wrap the child in a towel and take your little bundle with you.

Also, be aware that five-gallon buckets — the kind many people use when washing cars and doing other chores around the house — claim the lives of 30 children each year, most of them between ages

7 months and 15 months.

POISONINGS

The nation's poison control centers manage more than 2 million calls each year. More than 90 percent of these poisonings occur in the home, and more than half of non-fatal poison exposures involve children younger than 6. Medications and household cleaning products found in the home — often stored in kitchens and bathrooms — are responsible for most accidental poisonings among children.

Lock poisons, cleaners, medications and all dangerous items where children and pets can't reach them. Be sure and follow all of the medication directions given to you by your health care provider or pharmacist, and use child-resistant lids.

Also, be aware that carbon monoxide, an odorless, colorless and toxic gas, can kill you before you are even aware that it is present in your home. To reduce your family's risk of exposure, keep gas appliances properly adjusted, never let cars idle inside the garage and install carbon monoxide detectors near sleeping areas. CDC offers information about carbon monoxide at www.cdc.gov/co/faqs.htm.



TAKE CARE ON THE STAIRS

More than one-third of adults 65 and older fall every year in the United States. Older adults can help to reduce their risk of falling by improving the lighting in their homes, repairing any loose handrails on the stairs and making sure handrails are on both sides of the stairs. Stairs figure prominently in home falls for children, too. Invest in safety gates, and always be sure to attach the gate to a wall at the top of the stairs.