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Study: Candles causing more home fires than ever before Holiday season is extra dangerous

The number of home fires caused by candles reached a 20-year high in 1999, the most recent year for which detailed national data are available.

A report from the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) shows that from 1980 to 1999, the estimated number of candle fires jumped from 8,240 to 15,040 a year. According to the report, candle fires caused:

- * 4% of all home fires in 1999, up from 1% in 1980.
- * 102 deaths, up from 32 in 1980.
- * 1,473 injuries, up from 506 in 1980.
- * \$278 million in direct property damage, up from \$38.1 million.

Meanwhile, the No. 1 cause of home fires -- cooking equipment -- decreased by 29%. Heating equipment fires (space heaters, wood stoves) decreased by 77%.

Sales of candles and candle accessories reached an estimated high of \$2.3 billion annually in the late 1990s, and the popularity of candles is an obvious factor, says Marty Ahrens, the report's author.

"If you have more candles being used, you obviously have the potential for more of them coming in contact with something that can start a fire," she says.

Four in 10 candle fires occur when burning candles are left unattended; almost half of all home candle fires start in a bedroom.

Candle fires increase significantly during the holiday season, Ahrens says. In 1999, home candle fires were almost twice as likely to occur in December as in the average month.

Tough enforcement of voluntary industry standards for candles and candleholders is a must, she says.

But officials with the National Candle Association estimate that 85% of candle fires could be prevented if proper safety rules were followed, such as trimming wicks, keeping candles out of the reach of pets and children, and never leaving candles unattended or near flammable materials.

Members of the association, which represents 90% of U.S. candle manufacturers, abide by standards laid out by the American Society for Testing and Materials. The group recently added measures for improving glass candleholders -- some of which had been known to

break when exposed to sufficient heat -- and provisional standards for such things as flame height and stability of the candle base.

The candle association does not oversee compliance for imported candle products, but the testing organization says that all products in the USA, including imports, must abide by the same set of safety standards.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission has recalled 30 candle products since 2000 for safety hazards.

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