

ENVIRONMENTAL HOME

Fire hazards could be lurking out of sight

By Dan Howard

For TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

Imagine that without warning, every picture, keepsake and valuable that is important to you could be reduced to charred carbon. Even worse, lives of those dear to you could be snuffed out in the moments after a fire starts.

When you think about it, the destruction of fires is often a lot more total and complete than most natural tragedies.

Don't ignore dangers

We are lulled into believing we are safe from fire in our own homes.

When we look at a frayed electrical cord, we know that the cord has worked for the past three years. That fireplace has been used every winter for the past 10 years and never been a problem. You have dried your clothes in the clothes dryer, week after week, and the lint blocking the heat source didn't catch fire. Why would it today?

It's tough to take action when all has gone well until that moment. When we do the preventive work that prevents the fire, nothing happens to tell us we prevented a tragedy.

Service heating equipment

Heating equipment is the second-leading cause of home fire fatalities after smoking.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, it is also the major cause of carbon monoxide in the home.

The operation and venting of furnaces need to be checked. One example of killer defects are flue liners.

Those hidden metal liners can rot out from corrosive furnace fumes without any warning or way for a consumer to know. It takes a skilled technician dedicated to doing a good job and proper equipment to check a flue liner or a furnace heat



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Waiting to repair outlets and old wires around the home could be, quite literally, playing with fire.

exchanger to avoid these fire and carbon monoxide hazards.

There is a common serious problem that you have not heard about and is often ignored by heating professionals. You want to hire a furnace technician who will look at all of the gas appliances in the home.

High-efficiency furnaces can cause an intermittent problem of a furnace pulling carbon monoxide back into a home from other gas appliances, such as gas clothes dryers, hot water tanks and fireplaces. If you occasionally smell the odor of natural gas or have headaches, the cause could be a furnace drawing combustion products back into your home from these other appliances.

Return air ducts installed too close to these appliances also can cause the same problems.

Heat sources lead to fires

You can pretty much count on seeing fires started by space heaters and fireplaces in the news during cold weather.

Many of the fires are the result of defects that require only a minor repair. More often, fires are the result of careless mistakes in the use of heating devices. Spilled fuel, flammables too close to hot surfaces, improper wiring and other avoidable oversights are often the cause of these fires.

Have fireplaces cleaned and the flue checked with a camera. Have any needed repairs made before the first use each season.

Check for combustible materials too close to any source of heat or combustion. Everything from drapes to flooring or a child's toys or clothing can be the source of a fire.

Ventless gas appliances are more convenient and less expensive to install. They also leave all of the combustion fumes including carbon monoxide in the home.

Follow all directions for fresh air and operation. Take extra care in locating these in fire safe areas. Add carbon monoxide detectors in any area with ventless heaters.

Electrical hazards easy to ignore

"If it turns on, it must be OK" could not be further from the truth. A common electric fire hazard is improper or damaged extension cords. Never run extension cords under carpets, and do not use damaged cords. Make sure that any extension cord is rated to carry the load you are putting through the cord.

Loose connections at switches and outlets and failing motors round out the top causes of electrical fires. If you see melted switches, outlets or plugs or smell melting plastic or fire, shut off the power and locate the cause.

Circuit breakers are not intended to be used as switches. They are designed to shut off power before the house wiring turns into a "toaster wire." If you have repetitive tripping, there is a problem that needs to be repaired immediately.

No basic fire safety article would be complete without mention of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. You might be surprised

to know that carbon monoxide detectors might not sound the alarm to protect you at the toxic level of 100 parts per million, and smoke detectors vary in effectiveness.

Basic lessons about detectors

Detectors vary widely in quality and sensitivity. Just like Goldilocks and the porridge, some are too sensitive and others not sensitive enough.

Ionization smoke detectors are more sensitive to flaming fires, and photoelectric smoke detectors alarms are more responsive to smoldering fires. Combination smoke detectors or both types together is the best selection for your home.

Carbon monoxide detectors should also be installed. Nighthawk brand detectors are regularly rated highly by Consumer Reports. You might read it here first, but you will someday see a major news story about this demonstration by the manufacturer Bacharach.

A brand new Nighthawk detector was opened and then placed into a sealed plastic bag with calibration-grade carbon monoxide gas certified at 100 parts per million. According to OSHA standards, employees are to be removed immediately from a workplace at that level.

In both instances, it took more than an hour for the detector alarm to go off. There is a delay built-in alarm function response of carbon monoxide detectors. The solution is to install a detector which also has a digital readout in a visible location.

Fire is tragic, it is quick, and it is unforgiving for mistakes or oversights. Today is a good day to look around your home environment with fire safety in mind.

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