FEMA

U.S. Fire Administration

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U.S. Fire Administration
16825 South Seton Avenue
Emmitsburg, MD 21727
usfa.fema.gov

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Fire Safety for Older Adults

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Fire safety for older adults

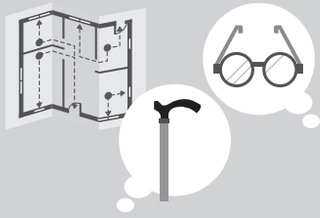
At a glance

Your risk of dying in a home fire is greater as you get older.

Smoke alarms give you extra time to escape.

Smoking is the leading cause of home fire deaths for adults 65 and over.

Cooking fires are the number one cause of home fires.



Plan your escape around your abilities.

As we grow older, our bodies change. Poor eyesight, loss of hearing, arthritis, dementia and side effects from medicine can make it more difficult to react to a fire. We need to consider these changes and how they may affect our abilities.

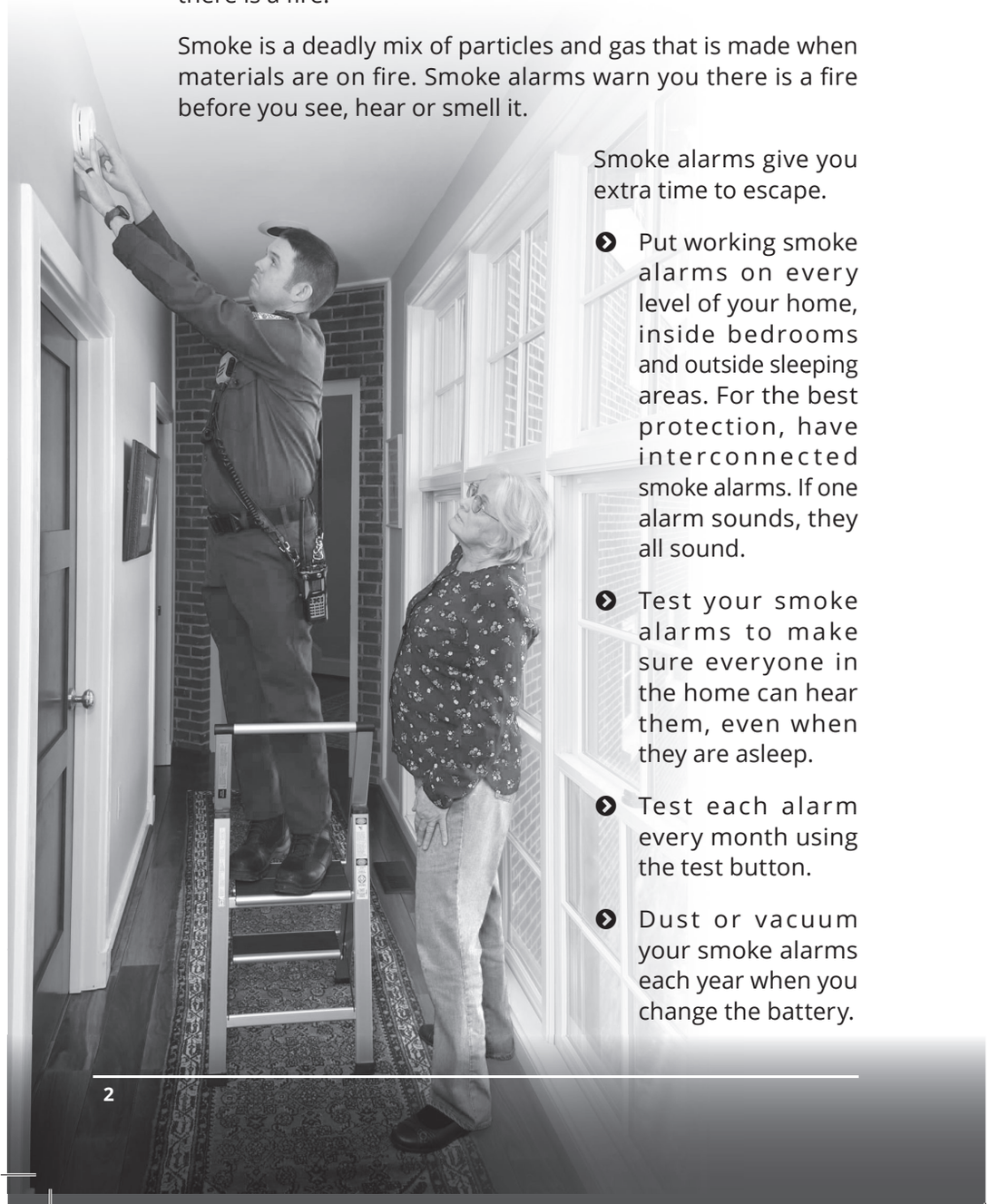
In comparison to the population at large, starting at age 65, people are twice as likely to be killed or injured by fires.

This booklet is designed to help you learn about fire safety.

Smoke alarms

Every year in America over 2,000 people die in home fires. Many of these people die in homes that do not have working smoke alarms. Smoke alarms warn you and your family when there is a fire.

Smoke is a deadly mix of particles and gas that is made when materials are on fire. Smoke alarms warn you there is a fire before you see, hear or smell it.



Smoke alarms give you extra time to escape.

- Put working smoke alarms on every level of your home, inside bedrooms and outside sleeping areas. For the best protection, have interconnected smoke alarms. If one alarm sounds, they all sound.
- Test your smoke alarms to make sure everyone in the home can hear them, even when they are asleep.
- Test each alarm every month using the test button.
- Dust or vacuum your smoke alarms each year when you change the battery.

For more information about fire safety for older adults, please visit our website at usfa.fema.gov.

Search: Fire Safety for Older Adults

Your local fire department may be able to visit your home to install smoke alarms and answer your questions. Call the non-emergency number to ask for help.

What to do if you have a fire

- Stay calm when the smoke alarm sounds. Get out fast and stay out. Never go back inside for people, pets or things.
- Feel the doorknob and the cracks around a door before opening. If you feel any heat, leave the door closed, and use your second way out.
- Close doors as you leave to help stop the spread of the fire.
- Smoke is poisonous. If you must escape through smoke, get low and go under the smoke to your exit.
- If you can't get out, keep the door of your room closed, and cover vents and cracks around doors with cloth or tape to keep smoke out.
- If you can't get out and there is a phone in the room, call 911 or your local emergency number for your fire department. Stay where you are, and signal for help at the window with a light-colored cloth or flashlight.

- If you have hearing loss, consider getting a notification device that produces low-frequency audible signals when the smoke alarm sounds.
- If anyone in your home is deaf, install a smoke alarm that uses a flashing light or vibration to let you know there is a fire. You can also buy a pillow or bed shaker that will turn on when the smoke alarm sounds.
- If you cannot hear the smoke alarm when you sleep, buy an alarm with special aid devices like a bright light or bed shaker.

- If you have a sealed alarm, you do not need to change the battery each year.
- Replace the entire smoke alarm every 10 years or sooner if it does not sound when you push the test button.
- Put smoke alarms at least 10 feet from the stove or bathroom. Steam from the shower or smoke from cooking can set off the alarm.

Home fire sprinklers

Fire sprinklers combined with working smoke alarms significantly reduce your risk of dying in a fire.

Fire sprinklers protect your family and your home.

Learn the facts:

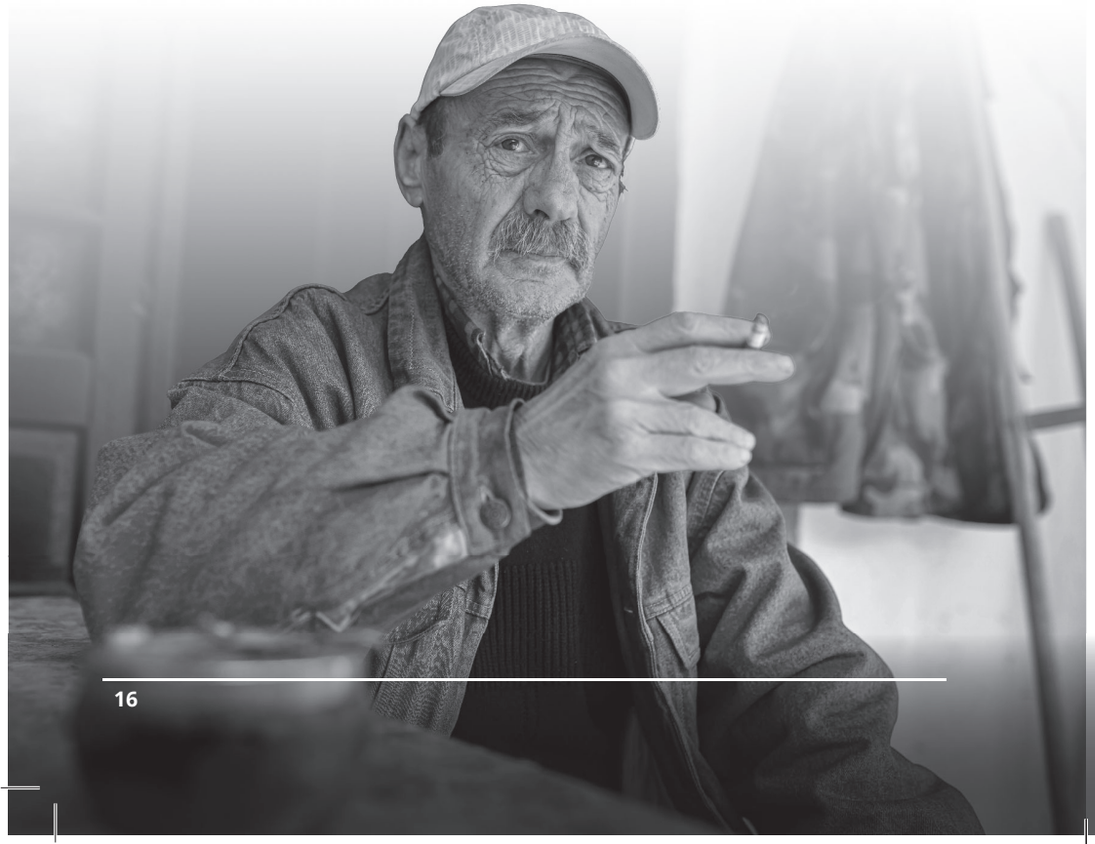
- Home fire sprinklers keep fires small by reducing the heat, flames and smoke made during a fire.
- Only the home fire sprinkler closest to the fire will spray water.
- Home fire sprinklers put much less water on the fire than a fire department hose.
- Home fire sprinklers can be installed in new and already built homes.
- Install a home fire sprinkler system if you are remodeling or building a home.
- Living with fire sprinklers is very easy. They require little maintenance, and they can save your life.

- Never smoke if you are in bed, if you drink alcohol, or if you take medicine that makes you sleepy.
- Never smoke where medical oxygen is used, even if it is turned off. Compressed oxygen saturates the air, your clothes, hair and fabric around you. When you attempt to use a lighter or match, the oxygen-enriched items ignite and burn more readily. If choosing to smoke, disconnect from the medical oxygen system, go outside and wait several minutes for the oxygen level to deplete from your hair and clothing before attempting to use a match or lighter.

Fire safety if you or someone in your home smokes

Smoking is the leading cause of home fire deaths for adults 65 and over. It is also the third leading cause of fire injuries for older adults.

- If you smoke, smoke outside.
- Use deep, sturdy ashtrays.
- Make sure cigarette butts and ashes are completely cool before throwing them out. Put them in water or a can that is filled with sand.
- Check furniture and places where people smoke before you leave your home or go to bed.
- Keep smoking materials, including lighters and cigarettes, up high and out of the reach of children. Use child-safety locks where you store your smoking materials.



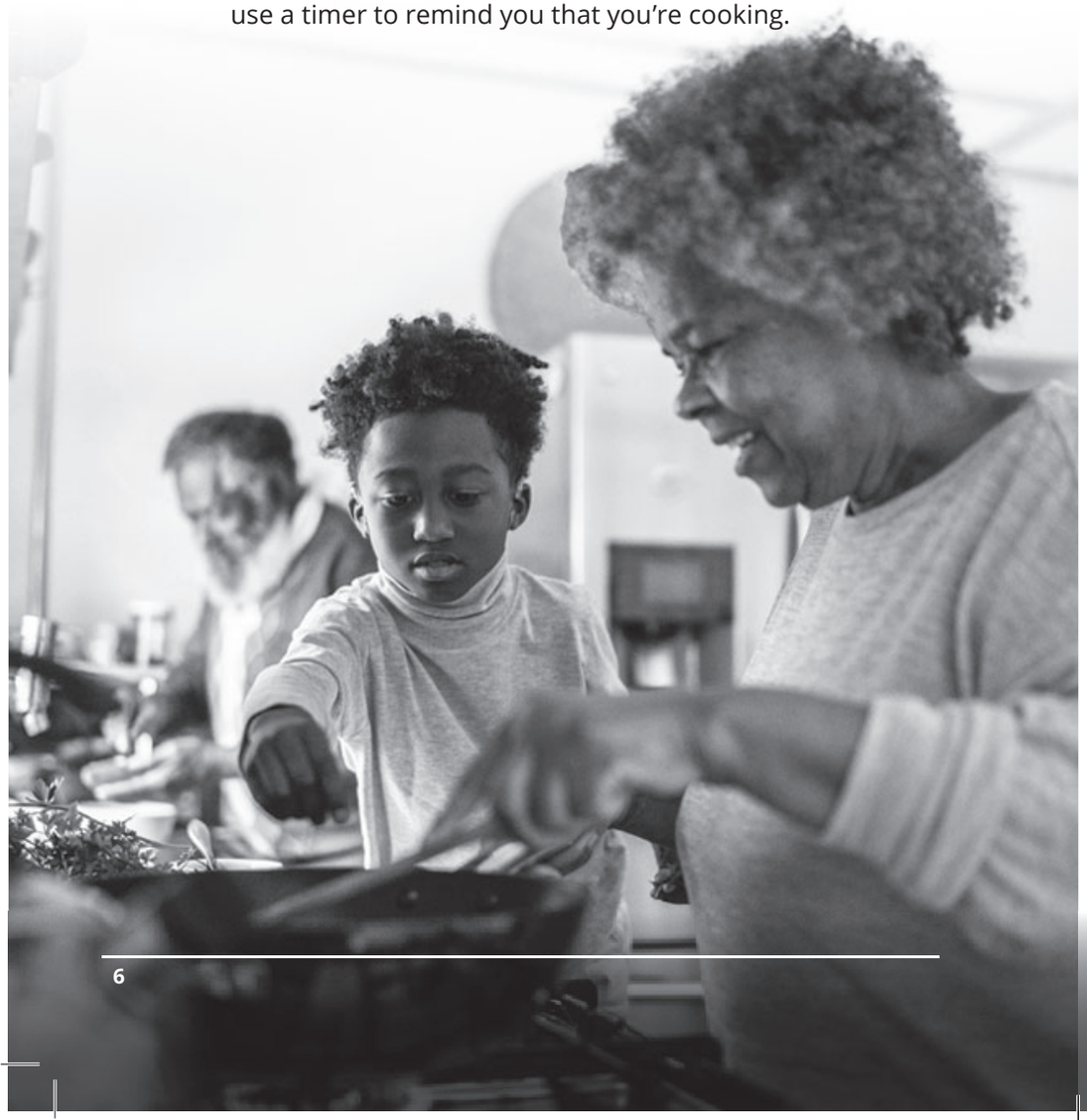
Did you know?

- A fire sprinkler uses an average of 341 gallons of water to control a fire. Firefighters, on average, use 2,935 gallons, and that is after considerable fire damage has occurred before their arrival. Reduced fire and water damage is a major source of savings for homeowners.
- Fire sprinklers react during the early stages of fire. This reduces the damage caused and allows people more time to escape the life-threatening effects of fire.
- Fire sprinkler systems are good for the life of the home. Even after you move to another location, fire sprinklers will continue to protect the next residents of the home.

Fire safety in the kitchen

Cooking fires are the number one cause of home fires. Many older adults also experience burn-related injuries during cooking. Prevent fires and burns by being watchful and alert when you cook.

- Stay in the kitchen when you are frying, grilling, boiling or broiling food. If you leave the kitchen for even a short period of time, turn off the stove.
- If you are simmering, baking, or roasting food, check it regularly. Remain in the home while food is cooking, and use a timer to remind you that you're cooking.



- Plan your escape around your abilities. If you use a wheelchair or walker or if you may have problems escaping from your home, plan ahead and let your fire department, family, building manager or neighbors know.
- Keep eyeglasses, keys, hearing aids and a phone within reach next to your bed.

Plan your escape

Planning what to do in case of fire can make the difference between life and death. Practice how to get to your outside meeting place quickly. In a fire, you may have only seconds to escape safely after you hear a smoke alarm.

- Know and practice two ways out of every room in your home.
- Make sure all doors and windows that lead outside open easily.
- Clear all clutter that may block your escape route or make you trip or fall.
- Have an outside meeting place a safe distance in front of your home where first responders can see you.
- Practice your home fire escape drill at least twice a year.
- If you live in an apartment, use the stairs to escape, not the elevator.

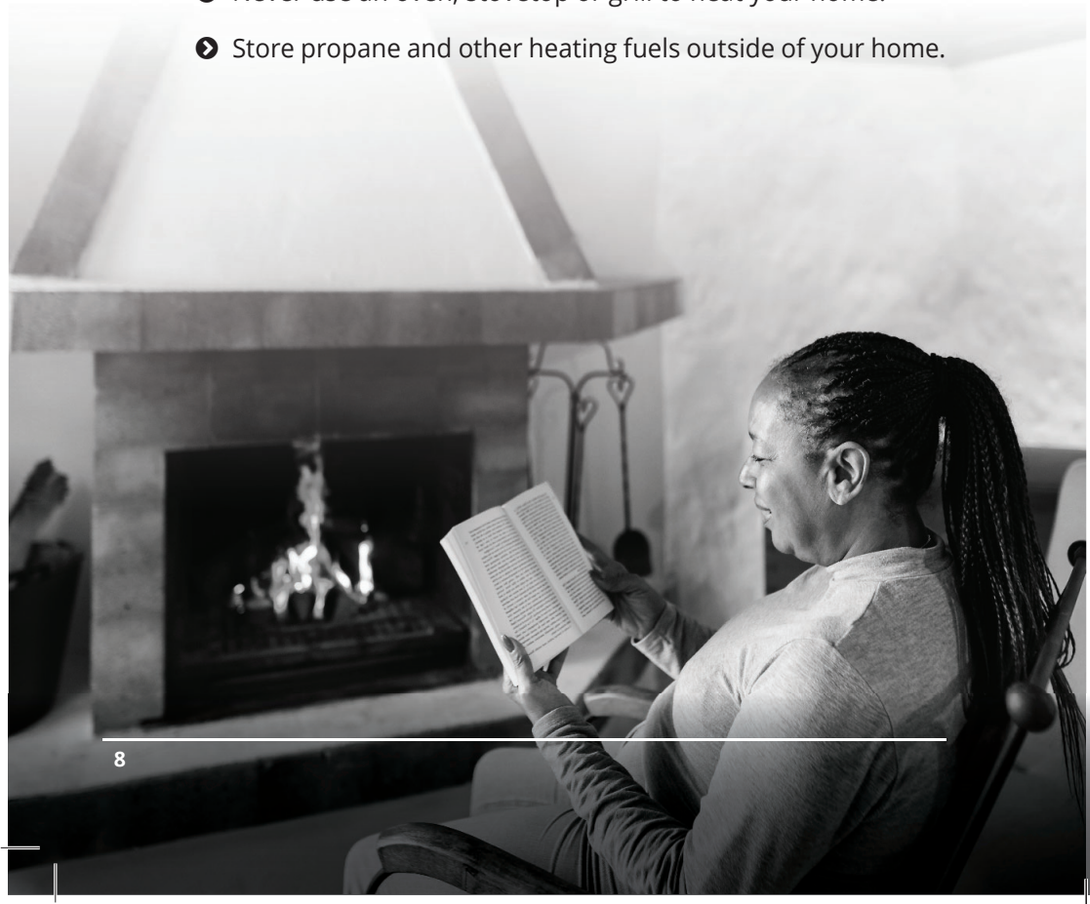
- Don't cook if you are sleepy, have consumed alcohol, or have taken medicine or drugs that make you drowsy.
- Wear short, close-fitting or tightly rolled sleeves while cooking. Loose clothing can catch fire if it touches a gas flame or an electric burner.

- Keep a pot lid nearby when you cook. If a fire starts in the pan, you can slide the lid over the pot and turn off the burner.
- Turn pot handles toward the back of the stove so the pots will not be knocked off.
- Clean your oven and stove top after each use.
- Keep anything that can burn away from the stove top.
- Check the kitchen after you finish cooking. Make sure the oven, burners and other appliances are off.
- If a fire starts, stay calm and get out. Once out, call 911 or the fire department from a cellphone or a neighbor's telephone. Have an outside meeting place at a safe distance in front of your house where first responders can see you.

Heat your home safely

When it is cold outside, we heat our homes to stay healthy and warm; but heating equipment can also cause fires if not used correctly.

- Keep children, pets and things that can burn at least 3 feet away from radiators, space heaters, fireplaces, wood stoves and furnaces.
- Buy a space heater that has an automatic shut off in case it is tipped over.
- Place space heaters on a level surface, but not on cabinets, tables or other furniture.
- Have a qualified professional install heating equipment.
- Ask a professional to inspect your heating system every year.
- Never use an oven, stovetop or grill to heat your home.
- Store propane and other heating fuels outside of your home.



- Never light candles if you are tired and might fall asleep.
- Never use candles in bedrooms.
- Never use a candle where medical oxygen is being used.

Candle safety

Candles are pretty to look at, but remember that a candle is an open flame and can easily start a fire.

Consider using battery-operated flameless candles. They look, smell and feel like real candles but won't cause a fire.

If you decide to use an open flame candle:

- Only burn candles when you are in the room.
- Use sturdy candleholders that will not tip over or burn.
- Protect candle flames with glass chimneys or containers.
- Keep candles at least 12 inches from anything that can burn.
- Always use a flashlight — not a candle — for emergency lighting.

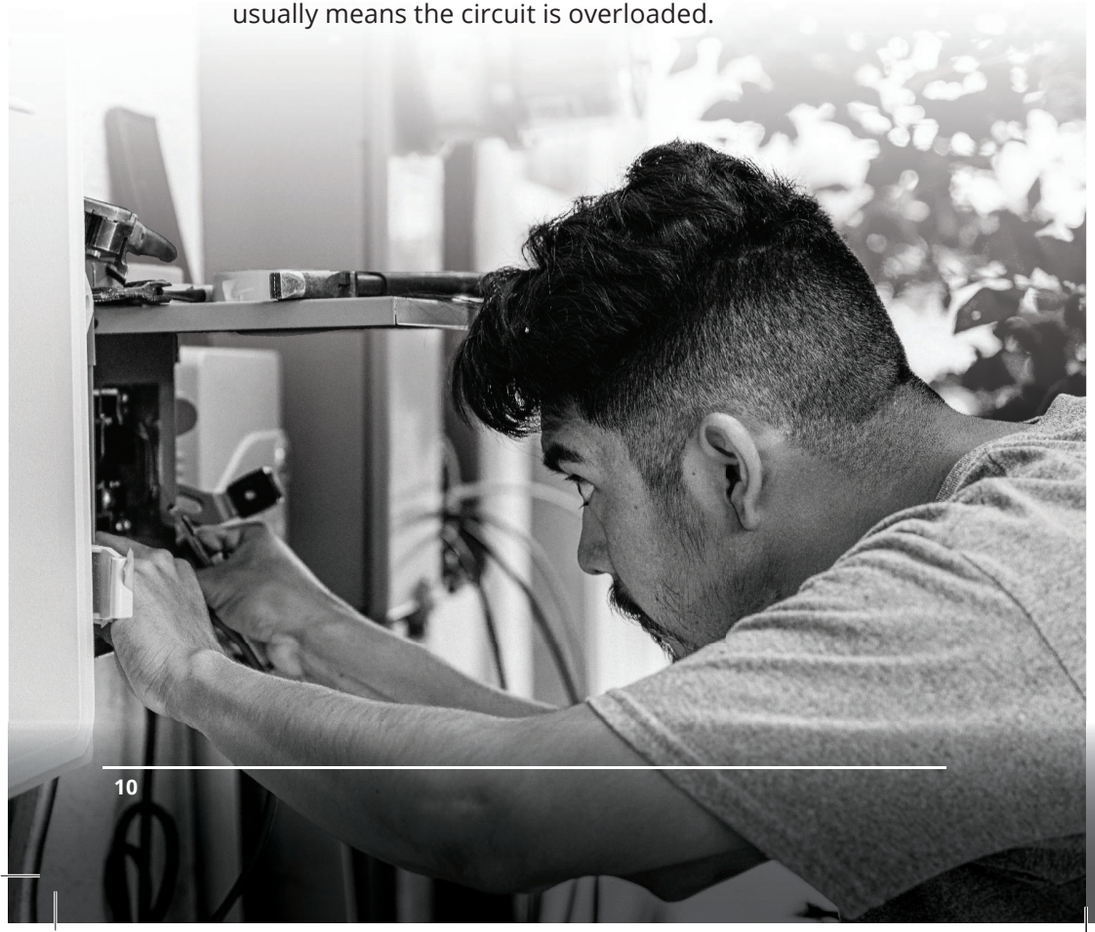
- Make sure all fuel-burning equipment is safely vented to the outside to avoid carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning.
- Install CO alarms, especially if your home is heated by any source other than electricity.

- Clean wood-burning fireplaces after each use. Put ashes in a metal container with a tight fitting lid. Place the container outside on concrete or gravel at least 3 feet from your home.
- To prevent scalds, set the temperature of your water heater no higher than 120 F (49 C).

Practice electrical safety

Older homes are more likely to catch fire from electrical causes than newer homes. Older wiring may not have the capacity to safely handle newer appliances and equipment and may not have updated safety features.

- Have a licensed electrician check your electrical system if you have frequent blown fuses or tripped circuit breakers.
- Replace outlets if plugs do not fit snugly or if the outlet does not accept plugs with one blade larger than the other.
- Avoid using extension cords. Have a licensed electrician determine if you need additional outlets installed.
- Use light bulbs that match the recommended wattage on the lamp or light fixture.
- Don’t overload electrical circuits. Tripping breakers or fuses usually means the circuit is overloaded.



- Check your electrical appliances often. Replace the appliance if the electrical cords are cracked, damaged or loose.
- Major appliances (refrigerators, stoves, washers, dryers, etc.) should be plugged directly into a wall outlet.
- Plug only one high-wattage appliance (refrigerator, stoves, washers, dryers, heaters, etc.) into an outlet at a time, even if the outlet has space for two plugs.