



FALL BACK ON

s a f e t y



## Dorm Room Safety 101

### Recent death in frat house fire suggests student awareness and responsibility are prerequisites!

On Tuesday, Aug. 13, a 20-year-old student at Michigan Technological University (Houghton, Mich.) died in a fraternity house fire. Five other students narrowly escaped the fatal, early morning blaze. Authorities believe the fire started on an unattended stove and quickly spread, destroying the entire house.

This is the first reported campus fire of the new school year, but if statistics are any indication, it is certainly not the last. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), an average of 1,700 fires occur in dormitories and Greek housing each year. This means firefighters respond to fires on college campuses four times every day somewhere in the United States. Last year alone, 19 students died in fires in dormitory, Greek and off-campus residences, according to Campus Firewatch, a monthly electronic newsletter focusing on the issues of college and university fire safety. The safety professionals at Underwriters Laboratories Inc. (UL) are offering tips that will keep the more than 5.6 million students enrolled full time in colleges and universities safe no matter what their living arrangement.

"One tragic death is one too many," said John Drengenberg, manager of Consumer Affairs, who reminds students that each year fire kills more Americans than all natural disasters combined. "Whether you live in a dormitory, sorority house or even a small off-campus apartment, your living area is likely overfilled with books, paper, bedding, clothes and other combustibles that make your room a bonfire waiting to happen. Even the smallest spark can be deadly. We urge students to start the year off by taking steps to decrease potential hazards and make sure a fire this tragic does not happen again."

### Electrical safety

- Do not overload extension cords, power strips or outlets: Extension cords, power cords and outlets can overheat. When cords overheat, they can also deteriorate quickly and cause a potential shock/fire hazard. Also, older buildings may not have modernized electrical systems, which means the wiring in walls would not be sufficient to handle the amount of electricity needed when multiple power strips are used.
- Get a power strip with an over-current protector: A power strip with an over-current protector shuts off power automatically if there is too much current being drawn.
- Know how much is too much: All appliances indicate how much wattage is consumed when operated; that rating can be found on the appliance itself and often within the use and care booklet that accompanies the product. Other appliances will indicate power usage in amps, rather than watts. Quick tip: if your appliance indicates that it uses 5 amps at 125 volts, then its wattage rating is 625W (5x125). If you are using an extension cord with two or more appliances, you must add together the wattage rating for all appliances used on the cord to determine whether that cord is right for your purpose.
- Be wary of electrical outlets that get too hot to touch: If an electrical outlet becomes so hot you cannot leave your hand on it, you have a potential fire hazard. Unplug all appliances and notify landlord or resident assistant immediately.
- Do not connect multiple extension cords together: The more plugs and receptacles you have connecting a single current, or a single appliance, to a single wall outlet, the more chance you have for arcing and sparking.
- Extension cords are for temporary situations: Contrary to popular belief, extension cords should not be used as a long-term solution when you need another outlet. The longer an extension cord is, the more chance it can be damaged over time.

- Do not route cords under doors or carpets: Extension cords can short circuit, overheat and ignite if they are buried under carpet, if they have furniture resting on and pinching them, or if they become bunched up behind hot appliances or equipment.
- Do not staple extension cords: The danger here is that you're damaging insulation meant to protect you from current and potentially exposing a wire that increases the possibility of sparking. It's like poking a hole in a straw while drinking a soda; no matter what you do you're going to get leakage, and, in a crowded dorm room, you never want a spark to get near any combustibles.
- Look for the UL Mark on any electrical product you use: The UL Mark on extension cords, lamps and anything electrical you are going to plug into a wall outlet tells you that representative samples meet UL's rigorous safety requirements.
- Never cut off grounding pin: Never bend, file or cut a grounding pin from a three-pronged cord to plug an appliance into a wall outlet. This disarms the protection meant to keep you safe and presents a tremendous shock hazard.
- Don't use cheater plugs: As a general practice, refrain from using cheater plugs. But cheater plugs with a special screw tab that plug into a wall outlet are acceptable.
- Use light bulbs with correct wattage for lamps: All UL-Listed lamps have wattage specifications near the bulb socket to tell you what size bulb is the maximum recommended. If no indication is on the product, do not use a bulb with more than 60 watts.
- Halogen lamps: If your living situation permits you to own one, make sure the halogen lamp meets updated requirements. All halogen lamps must be designed with a mesh guard that forbids contact with the bulb and an automatic tip-over switch.

## Cooking

- Cooking is the second leading cause of dorm fires (after arson) and the leading cause of fire injuries, according to the NFPA.
- Stay focused on cooking: Most cooking fires start because of inattentiveness.
- Look for UL-Listed appliances that feature automatic shut-off buttons: Appliances with this safety feature make sure that you don't leave anything brewing or cooking on the counter all day.
- Use caution when using electrical appliances: Never plug more than one high-wattage appliance into a single outlet. Check appliances for frayed or cracked cords and make sure to replace them or get them repaired by a professional technician if needed.
- Have plenty of fire-resistant potholders and oven mitts ready for use while cooking.
- Keep curtains, towels and potholders away from hot surfaces.
- Store solvents and flammable cleaners away from heat sources.
- Keep surfaces clean of grease.
- Never pour water on a grease fire: Water can make a grease fire spread, putting you in great danger. Slide a pan lid over the flames to smother a grease or oil fire, then turn off heat and leave until the pan cools. Use baking soda to extinguish all other types of food fires.
- Keep a fire extinguisher handy: Have a UL-Listed fire extinguisher in the kitchen and know how to use it. When there's a fire, there is no time to find the instruction booklet or study instructions printed on the extinguisher. Know how the extinguisher works before you need to use it.
- Never use a brown paper bag to cook popcorn in a microwave: Any bag not designed and approved for microwave oven use could ignite and pose a serious hazard.
- Heating liquids in microwaves: Stir liquid before heating and do not heat for more than 2 minutes. After heating, allow liquid to stand in microwave for 30 seconds before moving or putting anything into it.

## Drinking and fires

- According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study, "Alcohol and Health," about one-half of adults who die in house fires have high blood alcohol count values. The study also reported that alcoholic burn victims had a mortality rate three times that of nonalcoholic victims.
- Drinking increases the chance of someone falling asleep while smoking in bed. It also greatly reduces your ability to detect a fire, respond to a fire or fire alarm, and safely escape a fire.

## Candles and incense

- Candles and burning incense cause 12,000 residential fires every year, according to the NFPA.
- Candles should be extinguished when not needed.
- Never leave candles or incense unattended.
- Keep candles and incense away from curtains, flammable materials and unstable surfaces.
- Never empty ashtrays into garbage or other containers where flammables might be present.

## Escape plans

- Never ignore a fire alarm: Because every second counts in a fire situation, respond to every alarm as if it were a real fire. If you hear an alarm, leave immediately and close doors behind you as you go, to delay any potential fire spread. Do not lock doors.
- Have an escape plan: Building evacuations are delayed due to lack of preparation and planning. Read the posted plan in your dorm room or take a few minutes to devise one for you and your roommates.
- Know two exits from your room: You always need to assume that your first most natural escape route might be blocked.
- Memorize the number of doors to the nearest exit: You also need to assume that you may not be able to see. Know how many doors or landmarks are between you and escape, just in case.
- Never disable a smoke alarm by removing the battery: Vandalized smoke alarms inhibit early detection and endanger everyone in a dormitory. Never borrow a battery from any smoke alarm. A smoke alarm doubles your chance of survival should a fire occur. To make sure your smoke alarm will operate correctly, replace the battery and test as soon as you move in.
- Never hang anything from sprinkler systems: Hanging objects can prevent sprinklers from working properly.
- Keep a fire extinguisher handy: Know where the closest fire extinguisher is and how to use it. When there's a fire, there is no time to find the instruction booklet or study instructions printed on the extinguisher. Know how the extinguisher works before you need to use it.
- Protect yourself and your roommates before property and valuables: Property and valuable can be replaced, lives cannot. Personal safety is the most important factor when deciding whether to fight a small fire. Before you begin fighting a fire be sure that everyone has left the building, the fire department has been called, and the fire is contained to a small area, such as in a wastebasket, and it is not spreading. Also make sure your back is to an unobstructed exit to which the fire will not spread.

For more consumer safety information, visit <http://www.ul.com/regulators/pubedu.html>

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