

S A F E T Y N O T E S

February, 2016



The American Burn Association and Shriner's hospitals help sponsor an annual awareness campaign each February with the goal of reducing the number of debilitating burn injuries occurring in the United States throughout the year. We already know many of the typical burn safety tips that can prevent common burn injuries:

- Keep matches and lighters in locked containers out of the sight and reach of young children.
- Stand by your pan to prevent grease fires when cooking.
- Cover a small grease fire with a lid to smother it out. Never use water on a grease fire.
- Never plug a space heater into an electrical strip or surge protector.
- **Keep the hot water heater thermostat set at 120 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent scalding burns right out of the tap.** *Hot tap water accounts for nearly 25% of all scald burns among children and is associated with more hospitalizations and deaths than any other hot liquid.*

But some burn injuries occur from unexpected sources, such as towels heated in a microwave. You may remember the double fatality fire that happened several years ago in a Wenatchee retirement apartment. The cause of the fire was an overheated towel in one apartment. That towel burst into flames when it was removed from the microwave and unfolded on an elderly woman's lap. She died from the burns and her upstairs neighbor, who had inhaled a lot of the toxic smoke from the resulting building fire, died from a heart attack the following day.

Closer to home, two "hot towel" fire incidents within a 12-hour period last July invited further research by Spokane Valley Fire Investigator, Rick Freier. Muscle pains had prompted individuals in two different households to put moistened towels into the microwave to create a simple heating pad. In one case, the moistened towel was heated for about a minute but had a strange odor when it was removed from the microwave. The homeowner put

the towel outside on the deck. Eight hours later, the deck was on fire. In the second case, a woman was able to extinguish the flaming towel in the sink which prevented it from igniting the home. You can watch the tests that Officer Freier conducted on dry, partially dry and moistened towels heated in a microwave at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jypVdk9uvqo>. His bottom line: if you microwave a towel, make sure the towel is thoroughly moistened before heating it.

There are a variety of rice or flax seed heating pads on the market. In addition, many people make their own devices. Here are a few tips for preventing fires or burns with these microwaveable heating pads:

- Put a cup of water into the microwave when heating the pad.
- Generally heat the pad for just one minute. Never heat it more than two minutes.
- Do not use brown rice or Minute Rice in these bags because the rice deteriorates.
- Replace the rice or flax seed every year to prevent frequently reheated grains from starting a fire.
- Never put the heated pad directly on unprotected skin.
- Never place a heated pad on persons who are sleeping or may have a condition such as diabetic neuropathy. They cannot correctly perceive the degree of heat and may sustain a significant burn.

Cooling a burn in water is the correct first aid. Never put ice on a burn because it will further damage the skin. Persons should seek emergency medical care for any burn that is larger than the area of the palm of their hand. Since infants and toddlers have a very small palm, caretakers should be particularly alert to any burn on a small child.

“Stop-Drop-Cover- and Roll” is the phrase children learn to help them remember what to do should their clothing ever catch fire. Never run in a panic, but carefully drop to the ground. Then cover the face with their hands to protect their eyes and to prevent heated gases from entering their nose or mouth and damaging their lungs. Roll tightly against the ground to smother the flames. Anyone who cannot easily get down to the floor should grab a blanket, sweatshirt or towel to smother the flame.

Burn injuries are of particular concern for the elderly. According to the American Burn Association, “persons who are over eighty five years of age are four times more likely to die from a burn injury”.



Young children are at high risk of being burned by hot food and liquids. Keep children away from cooking areas by enforcing a "kid-free zone" of 3 feet (1 meter) around the stove.

You can sign up for this monthly newsletter, ask a fire-related question or suggest a specific safety topic by contacting Jan Doherty at jdoherty@spokanefire.org or by calling 509.625.7058.



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