



St. John's Regional Fire Department



## Fire Safety for Older Adults



Fire  
Prevention

# Home Fire Safety for Older Adults

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Home Fire Safety for Seniors

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Fire safety is a crucial issue for seniors who choose to live in their own home. Older adults face fire risk factors which do not affect the young. Weaker physical (and sometimes mental) capabilities make it harder to identify and respond to a fire, and create a higher risk that a fire will start.

Age-related changes affect the senses and reduce mobility. Cognitive changes, from memory loss to dementia, can be more hazardous than the physical changes: individuals may not realize they are in danger and may even engage in risky behavior. Alcohol consumption or the side effects of prescribed medication can add to the risks.

Seniors on fixed incomes may feel they cannot afford home improvements. Nonetheless, adaptations and repairs are necessary to enable independent living. Emergency evacuation can pose a challenge for older adults, and should be a priority when planning renovations.

Seniors will often need assistance from family members to put safety measures into place. As well, family members are in the best position to reinforce the precautions necessary to help their loved ones prevent or respond to a fire. The information contained in this booklet is to help aging family members protect themselves against fire in the home.



## Smoke Alarms

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Smoke alarms are a key part of a home fire escape plan. When there is a fire, smoke spreads fast. Most injuries or deaths that occur from house fires are because of the smoke, not the fire. Working smoke alarms give you early warning so you can get outside quickly.

### Safety Tips:

- ❖ Install a smoke alarm inside each sleeping room, outside all sleeping areas, and on every level of your home.
- ❖ Test each alarm monthly and replace the batteries at least twice a year. If you hear the smoke alarm “chirp” it means the battery needs to be replaced immediately.
- ❖ Smoke alarms may also be hard-wired into your home’s electrical system. These should have a battery back-up so they will still work if there is a power outage.
- ❖ For the best protection, have smoke alarms interconnected so when one sounds they all sound.
- ❖ Replace the smoke alarm when it reaches 10 years of age or sooner if it malfunctions.
- ❖ Seniors who are deaf or hard of hearing should consider purchasing flashing or vibrating smoke alarms.
- ❖ If your smoke alarm goes off when you are cooking and there is no fire, wave a towel under it to disperse the smoke and stop the alarm. **NEVER** remove the battery or take the smoke alarm down. Consider getting a smoke alarm that has a “Hush” button that allows you to silence the alarm in the event of a false alarm.



## Carbon Monoxide Alarms

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Often called the “Silent Killer”, carbon monoxide is a gas that you cannot see, smell or taste. It is poisonous, can make you sick and can be deadly. In the home, heating and cooking devices that burn fuel (i.e. oil, propane, wood) and an attached garage can be sources of carbon monoxide.

### Safety Tips:

- ❖ Carbon monoxide alarms should be installed outside each sleeping area and on every level of the home. For the best protection, have carbon monoxide alarms interconnected so when one sounds they all sound.
- ❖ Test carbon monoxide alarms at least once a month and replace the batteries at least twice a year. If you hear the carbon monoxide alarm “chirp” it means the battery needs to be replaced immediately.
- ❖ Carbon monoxide alarms may also be hard-wired into your home’s electrical system or plug into an electrical outlet. These should have a battery back-up so they will still work if there is a power outage.
- ❖ Follow the instructions on the package to properly install the carbon monoxide alarm.
- ❖ Replace carbon monoxide alarms according to the instructions on the package, usually 5 to 7 years.
- ❖ If the carbon monoxide alarm sounds, get everyone outside to fresh air and call 911. Do not go back inside until directed to do so by the fire department.
- ❖ Do not warm up your vehicle inside a garage, even with the garage door open.
- ❖ Do not run generators inside your garage, shed or house.
- ❖ Do not use heating or cooking appliances that are not approved for indoor use inside your home, garage, or shed. i.e. propane or charcoal BBQs or propane camp stoves.

# Cooking Fire Safety

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Cooking fires are the number one cause of home fires and home injuries. The leading cause of fires in the kitchen is unattended cooking.

## Oven and Stovetop Safety Tips:

- ❖ Never leave frying, grilling or broiling food unattended. If you need to step away, turn off the stove.
- ❖ If you are simmering, baking, roasting or boiling food, check it regularly and be sure to use a timer to remind you that you are cooking.
- ❖ Do not cook if you are sleepy or have consumed alcohol or prescription drugs that may cause drowsiness.
- ❖ Do not deep fry food in a pot of oil on the stovetop. Use an approved, thermostatically controlled deep-fryer instead. Do not leave the kitchen while using it.
- ❖ Keep pot lids nearby so that if the pot catches fire, you can carefully slide the lid on it and turn off the stove. **DO NOT MOVE A POT THAT IS ON FIRE FROM THE STOVETOP!!** In a panic, you may drop the pot or spill its contents which may catch your clothes or the floor on fire.
- ❖ Wipe up any spills because built up grease can catch fire.
- ❖ If there is a fire in the oven, keep the door closed and turn off the oven. Call 911.
- ❖ Mount a fire extinguisher in the kitchen, and check the pressure gauge monthly.
- ❖ Do not wear loose clothing when cooking: a dangling sleeve can easily catch fire or it can hook a pot handle causing the pot to tip over.
- ❖ Keep anything that can burn (i.e., oven mitts, paper towels, dish towels, food packaging etc.) away from the stove.
- ❖ Do not put or store anything that can burn in your oven (i.e. oven mitts, pizza boxes, food packaging, towels, etc.)

### Microwave Safety Tips:

- ❖ Plug the microwave directly into the wall outlet – never use an extension cord.
- ❖ Make sure the microwave oven is at a safe height, within easy reach of all users.
- ❖ Open food slowly, away from the face. Hot steam or the food itself can cause burns.
- ❖ Use only microwave-safe food containers and dishes. Never use aluminum foil, metal dishes or dishes with metallic trim on them in a microwave oven.
- ❖ If you have a fire in the microwave, leave the door closed, turn the oven off and unplug it from the wall, if you are able to do so. If the fire does not go out, get outside and call 911.

### Propane Grilling/BBQ Safety Tips:

- ❖ If you live in an apartment building, check with building management to ensure BBQs are permitted.
- ❖ Propane and charcoal BBQ grills should only be used outdoors.
- ❖ **FOLLOW THE MANUFACTURER'S INSTALLATION INSTRUCTIONS FOR CLEARANCES FROM COMBUSTIBLE OVERHANGS, DECKS, WALLS, FENCES, ETC. KEEP THE AREA CLEAR OF BRANCHES, LEAVES, OR OTHER COMBUSTIBLES.**
- ❖ Keep children and pets at least three feet away from the grill area.
- ❖ Keep your grill clean by removing grease or fat buildup from the grills and in trays below the grill.
- ❖ Never leave your grill unattended.
- ❖ Always make sure your grill lid is open before lighting it.
- ❖ Periodically check the propane tank hose for leaks. Do this by applying a light soap and water solution to the hose. If it is leaking, there will be bubbles.
- ❖ If there is a leak and the grill is not lit, turn off the propane and grill. If the leak stops, get the grill serviced by a professional before using it again. If the leak does not stop, call 911.
- ❖ If you smell gas while cooking, immediately move away from the grill and call 911. Do not move the grill.

- ❖ If the flame goes out while you are grilling, turn the grill and gas off and wait at least 15 minutes before re-lighting it.

### Charcoal Grilling/BBQ Safety Tips:

- ❖ If you use a starter fluid, make sure that you only use charcoal starter fluid. Never add charcoal starter fluid or any other flammable liquids to the fire.
- ❖ Keep charcoal starter fluid out of the reach of children and away from heat sources.
- ❖ When you are finished grilling, let the coals completely cool then dispose of them in a metal container with a metal lid away from the home and anything that can burn.

## Heating Fire Safety

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Heating equipment is one of the leading causes of home fires. Half of home heating fires are reported during the months of December, January, and February.

### Safety Tips:

- ❖ Keep anything that can burn at least three-feet away from heating equipment such as: electric baseboard heaters, furnaces, fireplaces, woodstoves or portable space heaters.
- ❖ Have a three-foot “kid and pet free zone” around open fires and space heaters.
- ❖ Have fuel burning heating equipment and chimneys cleaned and/or inspected every year by a qualified professional.
- ❖ Remember to turn off electric portable heaters when leaving the room or going to bed.
- ❖ Make sure the fireplace has a sturdy screen or tempered glass door in front of it to stop sparks from flying out.
- ❖ Ashes from a fireplace or woodstove should be cooled before putting them in a metal container with a metal lid. Keep the container outside, a safe distance from your home and anything that can burn.

- ❖ All fuel burning equipment should be vented to the outside to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.
- ❖ Install and maintain carbon monoxide alarms if you have any fuel burning equipment in your home. i.e. oil, wood or propane.

## Smoking Fire Safety

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Careless smoking is a leading cause of fire deaths for the elderly.

### Safety Tips:

- ❖ If you smoke, smoke outside.
- ❖ Never smoke in bed or while lying on the couch.
- ❖ Keep cigarettes, lighters, matches and other smoking materials up high and out of the reach of children.
- ❖ Use a deep, sturdy ashtray and place it away from anything that can burn.
- ❖ Do not discard cigarettes in garbage cans, potted plants, bushes, on grass leaves or anything that could easily catch fire.
- ❖ Before you throw away butts and ashes, make sure they are out. Douse them in water or flush them down the toilet.

## Electrical Fire Safety

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Electricity is a necessity for modern day living but can be dangerous if not handled properly. Treat electricity with respect.

### Safety Tips:

- ❖ Have all electrical work done by a qualified electrician.
- ❖ Only plug one heat-producing appliance (such as a coffee maker, kettle, toaster, space heater, etc.) into an outlet at a time.

- ❖ Do not overload electrical circuits.
- ❖ Check electrical cords to make sure they are not running across doorways or under carpets. This can pose a tripping hazard and can cause wear or damage to the cord.
- ❖ Extension cords are intended for temporary use. Use a surge protected power bar or have a qualified electrician install more outlets.
- ❖ If you are using an extension cord for temporary use, make sure it is properly rated for its intended use, indoor or outdoor, and meets or exceeds the power needs of the appliance or tool being used.
- ❖ If a piece of electrical equipment or appliance has a damaged, frayed or worn cord, then replace the entire unit. Do not tamper with damaged cords.

## Candle Fire Safety

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Candles may look pretty but they are another leading cause of home fires. Remember a candle is an open flame. The best policy is to not have candles in the home.

### Safety Tips:

- ❖ If you choose to burn candles, use only candle holders that are sturdy and won't tip over easily. Place the candle holders on sturdy, uncluttered surfaces.
- ❖ Light candles carefully. Keep your hair and clothing away from the flame.
- ❖ **NEVER** use a candle if oxygen is used in the home.
- ❖ Keep anything that can burn at least 3 feet away from candles and make sure there is nothing above them.
- ❖ Blow all candles out when you leave the room or go to bed.
- ❖ For festive decor, choose CSA approved electric lights.
- ❖ In preparation for an emergency, place flashlights in key locations, for example, beside the bed, favorite chair, and in the kitchen.
- ❖ Consider using battery operated candles.

# Portable Fire Extinguishers

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Fire extinguishers are considered first aid equipment for controlling and putting out small fires before they become large ones, however, they are no substitute for the fire department. Having the proper extinguishers, as well as knowing how to use them and how not to use them is important in safeguarding your family and your household.

Selecting the proper fire extinguisher for your home is as simple as A, B, C!

There are different types of fire extinguishers that can be used on different types of fires. The most common types of fires in the home are:

## **Class A**

Ordinary things that can burn such as paper, wood, cardboard and most plastics.

## **Class B**

Flammable liquids such as gasoline, kerosene, grease and oil.

## **Class C**

Electrical equipment such as wiring, appliances, computers and outlets.

The Class may be listed on the extinguisher by the letters A, B, or C, or by symbols known as pictograms.

A

B

C



## How to Use a Fire Extinguisher:

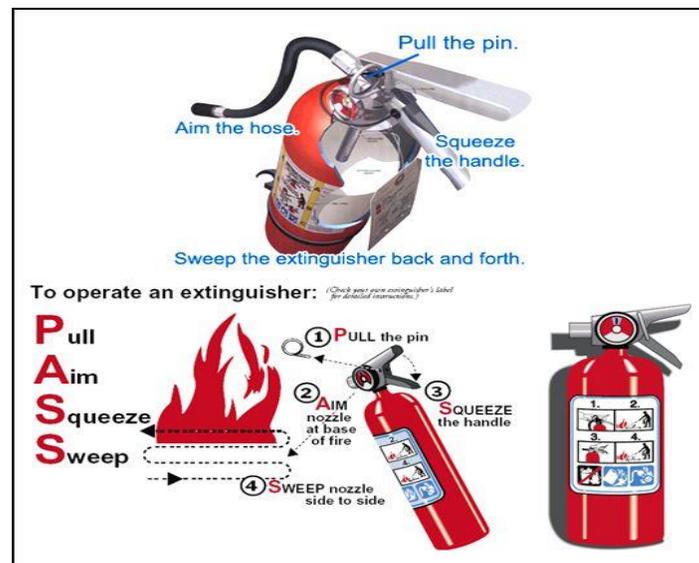
Most extinguishers will use the PASS method:

**P** – Pull the pin

**A** – Aim the nozzle

**S** – Squeeze the handle

**S** - Sweep the extinguisher back and forth



## Where to install fire extinguishers:

- ❖ Where the risk of fire is greatest, for example, kitchen, laundry room or garage.
- ❖ In a visible area.
- ❖ High on the wall out of the reach of children.
- ❖ Near an exit.
- ❖ Away from sources of heat.
- ❖ Not too close to where a fire may occur, for example, the stove, as smoke and flames may prevent you from reaching it.

- ❖ Check the pressure gauge monthly.



- ❖ If the needle on the pressure gauge is still located in the green section, the pressure is good. If the needle has moved up or down from the green section, have the extinguisher serviced or replace it with a new one and discard the old one.
- ❖ Extinguishers have a life span of 10 to 12 years. The date of manufacture will be on the extinguisher, either on the bottom or on the label. Have it serviced or replace it with a new one.

## Home Escape Plan

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If a fire breaks out in your home, you may only have a few minutes to get out safely once the smoke alarm sounds. In order to ensure everyone gets out safely, make sure you have working smoke alarms and a home escape plan. Many seniors still depend on escape routes that were planned when the kids were young. Update these plans with your current capabilities in mind, and practice the plan.

### Safety Tips:

- ❖ Ensure there are two ways out of each room and ensure that everyone, including children, is physically able to open all doors and windows in your home.
- ❖ Window and door locks should open easily from inside. Check to be sure that windows and doors haven't been sealed shut with paint or caulking, or nailed

shut; if they have, arrange for someone to break the seals all around your home or remove the nails.

- ❖ Keep hallways and stairs uncluttered so there is no danger of tripping and falling if you are trying to escape a fire.
- ❖ Feel doors before opening them to see if they are hot. If they are hot, DO NOT open them. That means there is fire on the other side. Escape through your second way out.
- ❖ If there is smoke, then get low and crawl under the smoke until you get outside.
- ❖ Call 911 once you are outside or from a neighbour's house, and do not go back inside your home. If you cannot leave on your own, you should still dial 911 and tell the fire department that you are unable to escape on your own and where you are in the house. Place a telephone beside the bed, as well as slippers, house keys, eyeglasses and a flashlight.
- ❖ Conduct your own fire drill to make sure you know what to do in the event of a home fire. If you or someone you live with cannot escape alone, designate a member of the household to assist, and decide on an alternate person in case the designated person isn't home. Fire drills are also a good opportunity to make sure that everyone is able to hear and respond to smoke alarms.

# Apartment/Condominium Buildings

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Seniors living in apartment or condominium buildings need to think ahead and be prepared in the event of a fire. It is important to know the fire safety features in your building and work together with neighbours to help keep the building as fire-safe as possible.

For best protection, you should select a fully sprinklered building. Meet with your landlord or building manager to learn about the fire safety features in your building (fire alarms, sprinklers, evacuation plans and how to respond to an alarm).

## Fire Alarm System

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The fire alarm system in apartment and condominium buildings provides early warning that there is a fire. There are smoke alarms and heat detectors and/or sprinklers (if the building is equipped with a sprinkler system) inside each private apartment and throughout the rest of the building. If a **smoke alarm** sounds in a private apartment, it **will not** activate the building fire alarm system because it is not connected to it. It is a local alarm only for your apartment. However, if a heat detector or sprinkler in a private apartment activates, it will activate the building fire alarm system. Smoke and heat detectors and/or sprinklers (if the building is equipped with a sprinkler system) that are located in hallways, stairwells, storage rooms, laundry rooms, and other areas of the building will also activate the building fire alarm system.

The fire alarm can also be activated manually by pulling a pull station. A pull station is the red-coloured device on the wall with instructions such as “pull down” or “pull in case of fire”. Pull stations have a connection with the fire alarm system of the building and they trigger all alarms simultaneously. If the pull station is a single action, you will just have to pull down on a lever. If the pull station is dual action, you have to either lift the cover or push in a panel, then pull the lever. Pull stations are located by exit stairwells and exit doors. In the event of a fire, any occupant who notices smoke or fire can easily pull the lever to alert everyone.

Examples of what pull stations may look like:



### Important Information:

- ❖ **Smoke alarms** are located in your unit and **will not** set off the building fire alarm system.
- ❖ **Heat detectors and/or sprinklers** located in your unit **will** set off the building fire alarm system.
- ❖ **Smoke and heat detectors and sprinklers** located in other parts of the building (hallways, stairwells, laundry rooms, storage rooms, electrical rooms, etc.), **will** set off the building fire alarm system.
- ❖ You can activate the fire alarm manually by pulling a pull station.
- ❖ Pull stations are located by exit stairwells and exit doors.

## Sprinkler System

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A sprinkler system is a system of piping, connected to a water supply, with sprinklers that automatically discharge water over a fire area. A sprinkler activation will activate the building fire alarm system. Each sprinkler has its own individual heat sensitive element which detects a fixed temperature of approximately 68°C. These heat sensitive elements are not affected by smoke, only by heat. As the temperature reaches a fixed temperature of approximately 68°C the sprinkler is activated. Sprinklers are extremely

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reliable and do not activate without heat. Only the sprinkler(s) closest to the fire will operate.

### Important Information:

- ❖ Sprinklers are activated by heat, not smoke.
- ❖ Only sprinklers in the area of the fire will activate, not the entire system.
- ❖ Do not hang anything (i.e. clothes hangers, decorations or air fresheners, etc.) from sprinklers as this could damage them and cause them to activate.
- ❖ Do not paint over or cover up sprinklers as this could make them inoperable should a fire occur.

## Evacuation Plan

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Know the locations of all available exits and exit stairwells from your floor in case the nearest one is blocked by fire or smoke. It is a good idea to count the number of doors between your unit and the exit stairwell in case there is smoke in the hallway and your visibility is limited. Never use an elevator in the event of a fire, unless you are directed to do so by the Fire Department. Make sure all exit stairwell doors are clear of clutter, not locked or blocked by security bars and are clearly marked with exit signs.

If the smoke alarm sounds in your unit and there is a fire, evacuate immediately, ensuring to close doors behind you. Pull a pull station on your way out to activate the building fire alarm which will notify everyone in the building of the fire. Never try to fight the fire before leaving. Go to your meeting place outside and call 911 to notify the Fire Department once you are outside.

If you are in your unit and the fire alarm sounds, feel the door before opening. If it is hot, do not open it. Call 911 from your unit and tell them where you are. Place wet towels or blankets at the base of your door and around any vents to prevent smoke from entering your unit. Wait in your unit by a window for the fire department to come get you out. If the door is cool, leave by the nearest exit. If there is smoke in the hallway, get down low and crawl under the smoke. Go to your meeting place outside and call 911.

### Important Information:

- ❖ If the smoke alarm in your unit sounds and there is a fire, evacuate immediately and activate the building fire alarm by pulling a pull station on your way out.
- ❖ If the building fire alarm sounds when you are in your unit, evacuate immediately
- ❖ Know where the pull stations are in your building.
- ❖ Know two ways out of every area of your building, including laundry rooms and other common areas, in the event of a fire or other emergency. It can be a door or a window, and make sure that everyone, including children, is physically able to open all doors and windows in your apartment.
- ❖ Know where your meeting place is outside.
- ❖ Once you are outside, call 911.
- ❖ Never use an elevator in the event of a fire, unless directed to do so by the Fire Department.
- ❖ Keep hallway and stairwell doors closed at all times to prevent the spread of smoke in the event of a fire.
- ❖ Keep all hallways, stairwells, and exits clear. These are your exit routes and using these areas for storage is not permitted.



# HOME FIRE SAFETY CHECKLIST

Check Yes or No, then add up your total to find out your score.

Yes      No

<b>INSIDE THE HOME</b>		
<b>Alarms</b>		
There are smoke alarms in every sleeping room, outside every sleeping area, and on every level.		
There are carbon monoxide alarms outside every sleeping area and on every level (if required).		
You test the smoke/carbon monoxide alarms once per month.		
Batteries are replaced every 6 months if your alarms are not hardwired.		
You can hear all alarms in the home, especially in sleeping areas.		
Smoke alarms more than 10 years old are replaced.		
Carbon monoxide more than 5 years old are replaced, or replaced as per manufacturer's instructions.		
*Check manufacturer's instructions on alarm installation, testing, maintenance and replacement requirements.		
<b>Escape Planning</b>		
Family/residents have prepared and practiced a home fire escape plan, including meeting place.		
Everyone knows what to do once a fire starts, including who helps children, older adults and pets.		
Everyone knows two exits from each bedroom or sleeping area.		
Exits are free and clear of obstructions.		
Overnight guests are aware of the home escape plan and meeting place.		
Everyone knows to call 9-1-1 in an emergency from a safe place outside the residence.		
Everyone knows to get out and stay out. No one goes back in!		
<b>Kitchen</b>		
Cooking is never left unattended.		
Check for cracked/worn electrical cords on appliances.		
Countertop appliances are unplugged when not in use.		

Curtains and towels are clear of heat sources.		
There is a fire extinguisher near the kitchen.		
<b>Living Areas</b>		
Cracked/worn electrical cords are replaced as needed.		
Electrical outlets are never overloaded.		
Wires or electrical cords do not run under carpets/rugs.		
Extension cords are not used as permanent wiring.		
Gas and/or wood fireplaces have screens/doors.		
Gas appliances are inspected annually.		
Wood fireplace chimneys are cleaned annually.		
Electronics have airspace to prevent overheating.		
Portable heaters are away from doorways, combustibles and high-traffic areas.		
Hallways are clear of obstructions.		
Candles are extinguished when you leave the room or LED battery-operated candles are used.		
<b>Bedrooms</b>		
Lamps are clear of things that can burn like curtains and clothing.		
Bedroom doors are closed at night. (This can save your life by preventing toxic smoke from entering.)		
Candles are extinguished before sleep or LED battery-operated candles are used.		
Windows open easily. (Locks are quickly and easily opened from the inside.)		
Second- and third-level bedrooms have escapes ladders.		
A phone is near your bed (landline or cell phone.)		
No one smokes in bed.		
<b>Basement</b>		
Electrical panel is clear of obstructions.		
Furnace and hot water tanks are clear of obstructions and anything that can burn.		
The furnace room is not used for storing things that can burn.		
<b>Garage</b>		
Gasoline is stored in an approved container, in a garage or shed.		
Used rags are stored in a metal container with a tight-fitting metal lid.		
A fire extinguisher is located in the garage.		
Garage is kept clear of sawdust/wood shavings.		
No car is ever left idling in the garage.		
<b>OUTSIDE THE HOME</b>		
Cigarettes are never extinguished in planters, on grass, in peat moss, or mulch.		
Barbeques and firepits are a safe distance from the house and from combustibles (siding, decks, etc.)		
Children and pets stay a safe distance from barbeques and firepits.		
Firepits are never left unsupervised.		

Trees are pruned and thinned to reduce fuel potential.		
Branches hanging over or touching the roof are trimmed back.		
Woodpiles are stacked away from the house.		
There is no debris or dead vegetation near the house.		
<b>IF YOU LIVE IN AN APARTMENT, CONDOMINIUM, OR STUDENT DORMITORY</b>		
Exit signs are lit.		
Emergency light come on when the power goes out.		
Apartment, hallway and stairwell doors are kept closed, unless they are tied into the fire alarm system.		
Hallways and stairwells are clear of clutter.		
All exit doors open freely and easily.		
Electrical rooms and laundry rooms are not used for storage.		
Fire extinguishers are installed in the hallways or in each unit.		

For more information please contact:

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St. John's Regional Fire Department  
Central Fire Station, Administration

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