

BURNING ISSUES

No one is safe from fire. But some groups of people are more at risk than others. Older adults—those age 65 and over—make up one of these groups.

Currently, one-eighth of the U.S. population is over the age of 65. This is projected to increase to one-fifth by the year 2030.

Adults age 65 and over experience higher home fire death rates than every other age group in the United States, except children age 5 and under.

Between 1989 and 1993, adults age 65 and over averaged 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, yet they accounted for 25.0 percent of the civilian fire deaths. This works out to 963 fire deaths per year. Adults ages 20 to 49 made up 45.7 percent of the population in this same period, but only accounted for 30.2 percent of the civilian fire deaths.

Older adults had twice the national fire death rate—and the older the group, the higher the risk. The rate for those 85 and over was roughly four times the national fire death rate.

In 1982, fire victims age 65 and over accounted for 22.2 percent of all fire deaths. In 1993, it was 26.4 percent.

TABLE 1

Fire Deaths in Homes by Nature of Injury and Age of Victim, 1989 to 1993

Nature of Injury	65 to 74	75 to 84	85 and Over
Burns and smoke inhalation	71%	68%	64%
Burns only	6	10	10
Smoke inhalation only	18	20	22
Other	4	3	4
Estimated annual number of fire deaths on which percentages were based	398	369	196

Source: Patterns of Fire Casualties in Home Fires by Age and Sex, 1989 to 1993, by Donna M. Slayton and Alison Miller, NFPA, September 1995.

TABLE 2

Fire Death Rates per Million People in Homes by Cause of Fire and Age of Victim by Selected Age Group, 1989 to 1993

Major Cause	All Ages	65 to 74	75 to 84	85 and over
Smoking	3.6	7.8	9.7	12.0
Incendiary or suspicious	2.6	2.5	2.7	3.8
Heating	2.2	3.5	7.1	13.3
Children playing	1.6	0.5	0.2	0.3
Electrical distribution	1.4	2.1	4.2	10.1
Cooking	1.3	1.9	3.7	7.3
Other	2.6	3.5	8.3	15.2
Total	15.3	21.8	35.9	62.0
Estimated annual number of fire deaths on which rates were based	3,856	398	369	196

Source: Patterns of Fire Casualties in Home Fires by Age and Sex, 1989 to 1993, by Donna M. Slayton and Alison Miller, NFPA, September 1995.

Why are older adults more at risk of being killed or injured in a fire?

- Many older adults can't walk well, making escape from fire more difficult.
- Forty-six percent of Americans over age 85 are affected by disabilities, includ-

ing immobility, hearing and vision impairments, and memory loss.

- Because many older adults fear crime, they use security devices such as bars, grates, and double-cylinder dead bolts. During a fire, these devices may trap older adults inside their homes.

Older adults need fire safety information

Only 5 percent of older adults live in nursing institutions, so educational efforts should target older adults in their own homes.

How to reach older adults

The NFPA's Center for High-Risk Outreach has the following suggestions for effectively spreading fire safety information to older adults.

- Use a sans serif type and a print size of at least 12 point in printed materials.
- Use uncoated paper with a matte finish to help to cut down on glare.
- Use black type on a white background—it's easiest to read.
- Portray older adults in positive, active roles in all artwork.

- Remind older adults to store matches and lighters up high, away from children's reach. The American Association of Retired People estimates that 3.4 million children currently live in households headed by grandparents.

- Encourage older adults to install a smoke detector on every level of their homes.

- Teach older adults to develop and practice an escape plan.