

Dormitory Fire Safety 101

Written by: Patrice Hampson, M.Ed.

Peterborough Fire/Rescue

©2003

Twenty-four years ago this month, I was stuffing blankets, sheets and my favorite feather pillows into packing boxes. Other mismatched pieces of luggage were jammed with clothing and toiletries, pictures of family, and addresses of friends who were also moving on to new digs. I was prepping for the great escape into a life where parental supervision was non-existent, where I could come and go as I please. Curfews, gone. House rules, gone. It was all about me. Or so I thought.

I'm writing this piece for the college students who are packing their bags just like I did so many years ago. Whether you are moving into a dormitory, fraternity house, or sharing an apartment with a group of friends, you will be responsible for your own well-being and for the safety of your building mates. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), an average of 1,700 fires occur in dormitories and Greek housing each year. Keep in mind that these numbers do not include fires in apartments occupied by students.

Dormitories are required to have smoke detectors and some have been built or retrofitted with sprinkler systems. However, the best way to be truly safe is to be aware of measures that help prevent the onset of a fire. Your best source of information will come from attending a comprehensive fire safety seminar within your dorm early in the school year. Often times, these seminars are conducted by student firefighters, your peers, who care as much about your safety as you do. Before you set foot on campus, take the following crash course on fire safety while keeping in mind that you will need to put it into practice every day in order to get a passing grade.

Unit One: Electrical Safety. Pre-requisites for this segment include mathematical aptitude and prioritizing abilities. In an average dorm room outfitted for two students, there are normally three double sockets. Insert two computers, two lamps, clock radios, a stereo, CD player, maybe a TV, small refrigerator, and microwave oven. Add them to multiple extension cords and what do you have? Electrical overloading which can lead to arcing and sparking. Instead of the fire risk, purchase a power strip with an over-current protector which shuts off power automatically when there is too much current being drawn. Be aware that older buildings may not have sufficient wiring to handle the amount of electricity called for in multiple power strips. That's where prioritizing your appliances and equipment comes into play.

Unit Two: Interior Decorating. This segment requires a practical approach to room personalization and a flare for safe mood lighting. I have no idea if this is still the decorating rage, but when I was in college, it was cool to have Indian print cotton material billowing from the ceilings. Halogen lamps were draped with silky scarves and extension cords were run under carpets in order to avoid the tripping trap. All extremely dangerous then, all very forbidden now. Improvements have been made in the design of halogen lamps, so if your living situation permits them, look for the newest safety features like a mesh guard over the bulb and an automatic tip-over switch. Extension cords should not be run under area rugs since they can overheat and ignite. As for the billowing fabric...save it for the bed.

Unit Three: Olfactory Protection. This segment requires the student to keep a clean room. Period. Incense and candles will not do the trick in covering up foul odors because plainly, they are forbidden in most dormitories. I could suggest a room freshener, but a weekly clean-up and keeping up with your laundry should do the trick.

Unit Four: Culinary Arts. Mastering this portion requires patience and the ability to maintain focus. Cooking is the second leading cause of dorm fires (after arson) and the leading cause of fire injuries according to the NFPA. Inattentiveness is the main reason cooking fires grow out of control. Most dormitories do not permit cooking appliances in the room, rather, they have a separate kitchen or cooking area specifically wired for such activities. If you're popping corn, heating leftover pizza on a hot plate or cooking a batch of brownies in the oven, stay in the room in which these appliances are being used. Remember, out of sight often times means out of mind, which in this case can be fatal.

Unit Five: Statistics and Alcohol. Can consuming alcohol lead to fire deaths? According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about one-half of adults who die in residential fires have high blood alcohol count values. These burn victims have a mortality rate three times higher than non-drinking victims. Drinking alcohol greatly reduces one's senses, leaving one slow to detect a fire, respond to a fire alarm and safely escape. The chance of someone falling asleep while smoking in bed is higher if that individual has been consuming alcoholic beverages. So the answer to the aforementioned question is YES. Consuming alcohol can lead to fire deaths.

Unit Six: The Great Escape, Chapter 1. (Not the one you're dreaming of). Requirements include cognitive conditioning and the ability to positively and repeatedly respond to painful, annoying stimuli. Yes, fire alarms are loud and obnoxious, especially when they are pulled for no apparent reason in the middle of the night. Intentional false alarms create a dangerous situation for responding emergency personnel and may divert them from a situation where there is a real emergency. Frequent false alarms eventually may condition a student to ignore all future alarms, which of course puts his or her life in danger if the event is a real fire emergency. Therefore, it is imperative that you respond to each and every alarm that sounds. Every time.

The Great Escape, Chapter 2. When a fire alarm awakens you out of a slumber, it's important that you follow these steps before trying to exit the building. Feel the doorknob. If it's hot, fire is near and you should keep the door closed. Call 911 and advise them of your location. If you are at ground level you may be able to get out through a window, but if not, stuff wet towels or blankets around the door to block smoke and heat from the hallway and hang something from the window to attract attention. Stay low to the ground to avoid the toxic gases and smoke that might seep into your room.

Of course, if the door knob is cool to the touch, crack it open and check for smoke in the hallway. Leave your room only if there is little or no smoke. If a little smoke is present, knock on your neighbors doors and yell, "FIRE" as you exit the building. Also note, never take an elevator when exiting a building, even if you believe there isn't a fire. There may be a one on another floor.

This little crash course barely scratches the surface of what you will learn when you attend a fire safety seminar. On most campuses, these seminars are required...making them one of your new house rules.

Peterborough Fire/Rescue wishes all college students a safe and productive academic year and invites the public to call them at 1-603-924-8090 with any safety concerns. Visit their website at www.firerescue.us. Emergencies, dial 911.