



Seniors and Kitchen Safety: Tips for the “Heart of the Home”

The kitchen has long been considered a central gathering place in the home. But it’s also a place where people often prepare meals alone. When it comes to senior adults and kitchen safety, the numbers don’t lie:

*The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reports that people over the age of 65 have a 2.5 times greater risk of dying in a kitchen fire than the general population.

*The National Fire Protection Association reports that three (3) in ten (10) home fires start in the kitchen, more than any other room in the house.

*The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 76 million cases of foodborne illness occur each year, including 5,000 fatal cases. An aging adult, due to a natural decrease in his/her immune system, can succumb to food poisoning more easily, and have a harder time fighting it off if they do.

For aging adults, it’s quite easy for the room that’s considered a primary gathering place—the kitchen—to instead become a nightmare. Not only are seniors over the age of 65 more likely to be injured in a kitchen fire, they are more likely to suffer a fall injury due to: items stored out of reach—both too high and too low—and the likelihood that meals are carried to eat in another room.

The reasons aging adults are more likely to start a kitchen fire, or otherwise be injured while prepping food include: they may be less able to take quick action in the case of a fire; medications that affect cognition; a decrease in balance abilities; and diminished mental faculties.

There are three key areas to consider when making the kitchen safe for a loved one: **fire prevention safety, comfort and convenience** and ensuring **pre-prepared meals and leftovers** do not carry foodborne illnesses. Some seniors will argue that being safe in the kitchen is just common sense—and some of it is—but revisiting safety tips for the kitchen is never a waste of time.

Tips on Fire Prevention:

*Never leave food unattended while cooking; it is the primary cause of kitchen fires.

*Don’t leave the house if food is simmering, baking or roasting.

*Investigate automatic shut-off devices. They cost as much as \$300, but peace-of-mind is priceless. According to agingcare.com, auto shut-off toasters are available for as little as \$30.

*Never set a coffee maker to automatically brew.

- *Do not cook while wearing loose clothing, and make sure all kitchen towels and potholders are located far away from cooking surfaces.
- *Have a qualified electrician check all wiring and outlets.
- *Consider switching to an electrical teakettle.
- *Use pots that have two handles.
- *Clean up the stove immediately after each meal so oil, fat and grease do not build up on the surface.

Convenience, Comfort and Fall Prevention

- *Clean up cluttered areas.
- *Install bright lighting.
- *Don't use out-of-reach cabinets.
- *Replace glass items with unbreakable ones.
- *Store heavy objects at waist level.
- *Check for leaking water from the fridge.
- *Install Lazy Susans in corner cabinets and on counters.
- *Turn pot handles inward.
- *Test and dust smoke detectors monthly, and replace batteries every year.

Preventing Foodborne Illness

- *Store meats and vegetables in sealed containers,
- *Use different cutting boards for meat and other food items; many stores now sell colored cutting boards. Use green for vegetables and red for meats.
- *Check the temperature of your fridge routinely. Cold food should be kept at no less than 40-degrees Fahrenheit. Return leftovers to the refrigerator immediately after a meal.
- *Don't assume food is safe if it doesn't have a soiled smell or appearance; foodborne bacteria cannot be seen, smelled or tasted.
- *Consider taking your own utensils to restaurants.
- *Hot food should be kept at no less than 140-degrees. When reheating food, make sure the temperature reaches 165-degrees.
- *When eating out, be especially careful at salad bars, and avoid condiments such as mayonnaise and dressings such as ranch.
- *When in doubt, throw it out, especially leftovers from restaurants.

REFERENCES:

www.fda.gov/food/foodborneillness

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The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA®)

Online data from: The U.S. Fire Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency

"Making the Kitchen Safe and Convenient for Seniors," by Maria M. Meyer and Paula Derr for www.caring.com
www.silverplanet.com