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Some friends were ending an evening together in a woman's home. The hostess had created a cozy atmosphere, with several candles of assorted sizes and types on a large, low, wide coffee table.

She had a sweet, old, longhaired cat named Nutmeg. As Nutmeg walked by the table, the tip of his tail caught a candle flame. One guest yelled, "The cat's on fire!" which stopped all conversation. Another woman, still seated on a sofa, was able to pat out the fire before the cat noticed it. Nutmeg was fine—maybe a little embarrassed.

Cats usually don't learn "stop, drop and roll." If the guests hadn't noticed and dealt with this fire before Nutmeg did, the situation could have turned very serious very quickly.

Unfortunately, not everyone gets by with only a close call. Candle fires nationwide are on the rise. Starting in 1980, the first year data became available, candle fires in the home numbered 8,240. They decreased through 1990, when they hit a low of 5,460.

Since then, the numbers have increased steadily, with three, consecutive record highs in 1995, 1996 and 1997, the

most recent year for which data is available. The 11,600 candle fires in homes reported in 1997 represented a 41 percent increase from 1980, and an 82 percent increase from 1990. In 1997, the 11,600 reported candle fires caused 156 civilian deaths, 1,202 civilian injuries, and \$171.1 million in property damage. What makes these statistics more significant is the fact that home fires from other causes fell steadily during the same period.

Data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System for the period 1993 through 1997, showed that almost half of the home-candle fires nationally started in a bedroom. More than one-third of these fires started because candles were left unattended, abandoned or inadequately controlled. Another one-fifth occurred because a combustible material was left too close to a candle. December showed twice the number of home-candle fires as an average month.

The candle industry is large and diverse. According to the National Candle Association (NCA), there are more than 200 commercial, religious or industrial manufacturers of candles in the United States, excluding the many craft-type candle makers. The NCA estimates that each major candle manufacturer produces between 1,000 and 2,000 kinds. Candles also are imported, and new products are being introduced continually.

Consumers expect the products they buy to be safe. They don't expect a holder to break, and they may not consider whether the holder itself

Candle Fires:

A Growing

can catch fire. However, these things happen, and that's why the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission has recalled a number of candles and candle-related products. It's also why the American Society for Testing and Materials is exploring the possibility of voluntary safety labels on candles, as well as other standards.

We need to learn more about who uses candles of what types and how they use them. With this knowledge, public-safety educators can target their messages better. Industry also may develop new ways to protect customers. Consider, for example, if candles self-extinguished before burning down completely, some fires would be prevented. Other suggestions also are on the table.

If you use candles, follow these tips from the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA):

- Use only with constant adult supervision.
- Extinguish when leaving a room or going to sleep.
- Keep candles away from items that can catch fire (e.g., Christmas trees, flammable decorations, clothing, books, paper, and curtains).
- Make sure you place candles on a secure piece of furniture, in sturdy holders that will not tip over. Make sure the holders are non-combustible and big enough to collect all the dripping wax.

- Do not put lit candles in windows, where blinds or curtains can touch them.

- Keep wicks trimmed to one-quarter-inch, and extinguish candles when they burn down to within two inches of the holder.

- Keep candles and all open flames away from flammable liquids.

- Do not use candles in places where they can be knocked over by children or pets.

Remember these NFPA tips when young children are present:

- Keep candles up high, out of reach.

- Never leave a child unattended in a room with a candle. A child should not sleep in a room with a lit candle.

- Keep all matches and lighters up high and out of sight and reach of children. The preferred storage area is a locked cabinet.

During power outages, follow these NFPA suggestions:

- Flashlights and other lights generated by batteries are much safer light sources than candles.

- Try to avoid carrying a lit candle.

- Don't use a candle to go into a closet to look for something.

- Never use a candle for light when fueling equipment, such as a kerosene heater or lantern. The flame may ignite the vapors. 

An unattended candle started this fire, which caused an estimated \$50,000 worth of damage.

Photo courtesy of Mike Bean



Problem