

Seniors Get Lesson On Fire Awareness

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Fire does not discriminate, but several factors put older people at a high risk for death and injury from fires, according to local and state fire officials.

Older adults are the fastest-growing age group of the American population; they tend to be in close contact with a source of the fire where their clothing, bedding or upholstery ignite; they may have their response during fire prohibited because of decreased mobility and other health issues; and they may use medications that could lead to a slower response or confusion, according to the S.C. Fire Marshal's website.

"As the population is going up, more people are getting older," said S.C. State Fire Marshal John Reich. "Senior citizens might not hear smoke alarms as well and their mobility is decreased as far as physical ability to evacuate."

In an effort to educate seniors about fire safety, Lt. Christian Sliker with the Myrtle Beach Police Department held a seminar Tuesday at the Grand Strand Senior Center in Myrtle Beach.

Sliker, who said about 70 people attended Tuesday, said many had questions about smoke detector placement, the life span of batteries and when to change them.

Sliker also holds fire prevention bingo once a month at Magnolias Assisted Living of Myrtle Beach. "I want seniors to know we care. Whether you're 2, 10, 20 or 80, fire safety applies to everyone. We want to make sure every age group is fire safety."

For 91-year-old Mickey Rampulla, a recent incident with her microwave has taught her how important it is to be fire safe.

Rampulla, who attended Sliker's seminar, had put food in her microwave and intended to set it to eight seconds, but set it for 80 seconds instead, she said. The microwave started smoking and set off the fire alarms. She said the Fire Department responded right away.

"I learned that from now on, you've got to be very careful when you put something in the microwave or oven," said Rampulla, who said the incident happened about five months ago. She said she was happy with the safety tips Sliker shared with Tuesday's crowd.

One of those tips, according to Thelma Osbourne, 70, is to properly place a carbon monoxide detector on the wall above the floor and not near a fireplace - something Osbourne said she didn't realize.

More important, when it comes to fire safety, individuals who have working smoke alarms in their place have a 50 percent greater chance of survival and an 82 percent greater chance of survival if they install a residential sprinkler system, Reich said.

"You used to have more time to get out of the house [in the event of a fire], but now you have three minutes or less to get out of the house, because the flashover occurs more rapidly now due to the combustibility of furniture and the lightweight construction of homes," Reich said.

According to statistics from the Office of State Fire Marshal, there were 79 fire fatalities statewide in 2009, up from 74 in 2008 and 60 in 2007. Of those in 2009, 27 were individuals aged 61 and older, and of the ones in 2008, 28 were individuals in the same age group. As of July this year, there have been 41 fire deaths statewide compared with 55 during the same time period in 2009.

There has been one fire fatality in Horry County as of July and none in Georgetown County.

Sliker plans to hold another Senior Fire Safety seminar from 12:15 to 1 p.m. Sept. 21 at the Grand Strand Senior Center, 1268 21st Ave. N., to do more of a one-on-one with the seniors.

The Midway Fire Rescue Department also plans to hold fire and safety programs in October, which is Fire Prevention Month, to promote the national "Smoke Alarms: A Sound You Can Live With" campaign, and to help Georgetown County residents understand smoke alarm recommendations, according to Midway Fire officials.