

Why Trust Anyone Else?

Hidden Fire Hazards

You may consider your home fire-safe, but dangers lurk around your workbench, behind your walls, and right on your kitchen counter. Here's how to extinguish them:

Most of us know not to leave burning candles unattended or overload our outlets, but firefighters still respond to about 370,000 home blazes every year, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). Experts reveal surprising hazards and how to avoid unwittingly fanning the flames.

1. **WIRING:** “People don’t think of wiring as a danger, because it’s out of sight behind walls.” says Lorrain Carli of the NFPA. But electrical fires have accounted for more than 50,000 home blazes a year, plus \$1.5 billion in property damage. And seemingly innocuous acts, like driving screws into a wall to hang a mirror, can easily pierce wiring. **One good fix:** Replace circuit breakers with arc-fault circuit interrupters (found in hardware stores for about \$30). These safeguards detect dangerous electrical arcs – abnormal sparks that signal bad insulation or loose connections- and stop them before they start a fire.
2. **KITCHEN CLUTTER:** Paper towels, pot holders, recipe cards: they’re all sitting near your stovetop, ready to ignite. Is it any wonder 41 percent of home fires start in the kitchen? **One good fix:** Keep a 3-foot zone between combustible materials and the burners. And, of course, never leave cooking unattended.
3. **CLOTHES DRYER:** Even if you dutifully empty your lint tray every time you dry clothes, the material still builds up inside the dryer cabinet, which holds its heating element and is usually located at the back or bottom of the machine. If enough lint accumulates there, a blaze can start. **One good fix:** to minimize the risk, hire a pro to clean the cabinet every two years.



4. **EXCESSIVE SAWDUST:** “The problem with sawdust is that it doesn’t look very dangerous,” says Tom Harned, a field manager for Liberty

Mutual. Yet it burns quickly, much faster than other kinds of dust, which tend not to be as concentrated. If you don’t have a good dust collection system, sawdust will accumulate on surfaces, where it can combust. **One good fix:** Rule of thumb: If you have even an ultrathin layer of the stuff, you’re asking for trouble. Regularly use a vacuum designed specifically for combustible dust. And don’t use compressed air in a can to blow sawdust off surfaces: It can propel the dust into the air where it can more easily ignite.

5. **LOOSE OUTLETS:** The blades inside electrical outlets loosen over time, something you may notice when you plug in an appliance and the cord falls out easily. This may seem like little more than a nuisance, but loose blades can generate intense heat that can lead to fires, says Harned. **One good fix:** Your best bet is to replace outlets as soon as you notice that plugs don’t fit snugly.
6. **VINTAGE APPLIANCES:** That 1930’s fan you found in your parent’s attic. The industrial light you snapped up for \$10 at a yard sale. The vintage chrome coffeemaker from eBay. Old-fashioned plug-ins looks great and may still run, but they were made according to antiquated safety codes and may include frayed or damaged wires. **One good fix:** Have them re-wired, and in general, stick with modern equipment that comes with a UL mark, signifying that Underwriters Laboratories has vouched for the item’s safety in actual use.



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