

State Fire Marshal and Task Force Launch Home Oxygen Safety Campaign

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan, Dr. Colleen Ryan of Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), and the state Task Force on Home Oxygen Safety today unveiled a public awareness campaign on the fire danger of home oxygen use at MGH.

“Tragic blazes such as the Quincy fire on December 26, 2009, the Whitman fire last May, and the South Boston fire of 2002 — where a smoker using home oxygen ignited a fire resulting in the death of an eight-year-old girl — highlight the risks associated with home oxygen use,” says State Fire Marshal Coan.

“As the baby boomer generation ages, more and more patients are treated in their homes with portable medical oxygen,” says Colleen Ryan, MD, Staff Surgeon, Sumner Redstone Burn Center, Massachusetts General Hospital and an Associate Professor of Surgery, Harvard Medical School. “It’s crucial that patients, their families, physicians and other caregivers are aware of and understand fire risks associated with home oxygen use,” she adds.

The campaign will include television and radio public service announcements, a printed brochure, and educational guidelines for firefighters, injury prevention professionals, and first responders. The television and radio public service announcements will run through June.

Since 1997 home oxygen has been involved in 24 fire deaths in Massachusetts, caused more than 50 serious injuries, seven firefighter injuries and 69 identifiable incidents. In 2009 alone there have been five severe fire incidents with home oxygen; one involved a candle and four involved smoking.

“Physicians who care for patients with chronic lung disease look forward to using these new materials to help patients and their family members understand the fire risks of home oxygen use,” says Paul F. Currier, MD, MPH, Director of Quality of the Pulmonary and Critical Care Division of Massachusetts General Hospital. “There are more resources for patients trying to quit smoking today than ever before. I would encourage any smoker to ask their doctor about what help is available.”

“While smoking is the leading cause of fires involving home oxygen, it is not the only cause. It is important to keep ten feet away from any flame or heat source such as electric razors, gas stoves, heaters, hair dryers, and candles. Don’t wear oxygen near heat sources or when using these appliances,” says Coan. “Home oxygen increases oxygen levels in the air, making fires burn faster and hotter. Furniture, clothes, bedding and hair absorb oxygen and can catch fire easily. This is a key point that most people don’t understand and is why home oxygen increases fire risk.”

“People need to think about how flammable products such as hair spray and petroleum-based lip balms and lotions can catch fire in the presence of increased oxygen. A cigarette, a candle or other heat source can ignite them quickly which poses a significant risk for these patients,” adds Ryan.

Understanding that increased oxygen present in the air, furniture, hair, clothing and bedding can ignite and accelerate a fire, patients using home oxygen need to know that even though the tank may be shut off, the danger still remains.

Less Dangerous Smoking

There is no safe way to smoke if you use home oxygen. However, until you do quit there is a less dangerous way. Shut off the oxygen. Wait ten minutes and go outside to smoke. This will stop adding new oxygen to your clothes and hair and then it will allow the oxygen to dissipate more quickly into the larger atmosphere instead of adding to an already oxygen-enriched home environment.

Risk to Firefighters

Increased oxygen in a fire building increases the danger to firefighters. Their protective gear will catch fire at a lower temperature when there is more oxygen in the room. Along with risks to the patient, their family, and other building residents, home oxygen fires also pose a greater threat to firefighters, as their equipment catches fire at a much lower temperature leaving them vulnerable to life threatening injuries.

“Understanding that there is no way to smoke safely when using home oxygen, patients who smoke can best protect themselves, their loved ones and neighbors by quitting,” says Currier. “There are a variety of resources available for smokers looking to quit and having a conversation with their doctor is a great way to start.”

Kevin P Partridge- Director
Emergency Response and Homeland Security
Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security
Department of Fire Services
P.O. Box 1025 - State Road
Stow, MA 01775-1025
978-567-3179 (direct)
978-567-3121 (fax)
<http://www.mass.gov/dfs>