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## HIDDEN HAZARDS: Just because appliances work fine doesn't mean they're safe

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TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Saturday, December 3, 2005

The next time you catch yourself obsessing about terrorism or avian flu, check your dryer vent.

You are far more likely to experience an appliance fire than an attack by pandemics or terrorists.

Common household items portable heaters and big-box workhorses such as dryers, washers, ranges and dishwashers -- are less obvious hazards than furnaces and fireplaces but pose serious risks if not properly cleaned, maintained and used.

Most homeowners, however, ignore appliances as long as they're working properly.

Consumers should follow manufacturer's guidelines for maintenance and safety checks, said Kelli Turner, community education manager for the Virginia Department of Fire Programs. Among other precautions, get a certified electrician to check outlets and wiring annually, Turner said.

"Follow basic precautions, such as never using the dryer or dishwasher when you're not in the home. You wouldn't leave a candle burning in the house when you're away."

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission considers space heaters and clothes dryers the most dangerous home appliances.

Space heaters cause 21,800 home fires and 300 deaths per year in the U.S. Gas leaks, carbon monoxide poisoning, burns and shock are other potential threats.

Heaters should be at least 3 feet from anything combustible. Inspect the cord periodically and never run a heater with a damaged cord. Don't use extension cords. Check periodically for a good fit of the plug in the outlet. If the plug is hot, the outlet might need to be replaced by a qualified technician.

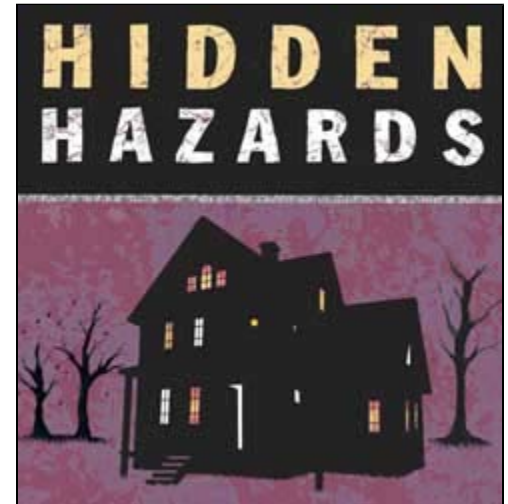
A heater should be placed on a flat, level surface, not on furniture. Unless the heater is designed for use outdoors or in bathrooms, do not use it in potentially wet areas.

Look for the Underwriters Laboratories (UL) mark, which indicates that the heater has met UL safety standards.

If your heater uses liquid fuel, use only the fuel recommended by the manufacturer. The wrong fuel could burn hotter and cause a fire. Turn off the heater and let it cool before refueling.

Dryers account for almost 16,000 fires a year in the U.S., according to the safety commission. On average, those fires cause 20 deaths and more than \$84.4 million in property damage.

Cleaning out the lint trap after each dryer load isn't sufficient to maintain safety. "Lint builds up on the inside



walls of the vent that leads outside the house," said Chris Hall, president of repairclinic.com, in a phone interview. "That lint is extremely flammable. The dryer will start venting poorly, and once the lint makes contact with a heating element or gas flame, it'll ignite and burn extremely rapidly."

Dryer vents should be cleaned annually, said Ronald C. Reynolds, chief engineer for the State Fire Marshal's Office. Cleaning the vent requires shutting off the power to the dryer, moving it away from the wall and disconnecting the vent clamps.

Use a special vent brush to remove the lint. LintEater's Rotary Dryer Vent Cleaning Kit sells for \$40 ([www.lint eater.com](http://www.lint eater.com)). Bed, Bath & Beyond sells a vent brush with a shorter reach but a lower price (about \$10).

Lint traps should be removed and scrubbed periodically with a soapy brush. "If you use dryer sheets, they can build up residue on the lint trap that you can't see," Reynolds said. "Take the trap out and fill it with water and you'll probably see that it holds water"

Vents should be made of rigid corrugated metal. Plastic or vinyl accordion-type tubing is flammable and prone to lint buildup in ridges, he noted. The dryer should be vented to the outdoors, not to a wall or attic.

Gas-fired dryers should be professionally inspected occasionally to ensure that the gas line and connection are intact and leak-free.

The safety commission also warns homeowners that dryers should be on only when someone is home. Don't dry items that contain plastic, rubber or foam, which retain heat and can catch fire.

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