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With College Fires on the Rise: Prevention is Key

Fires in college dormitories and other university housing are on the rise according to an announcement made yesterday by Federal officials. There were 3,300 housing fires in 2005 which represented a 24% increase over the last 25 year average. The Electrical Safety Foundation International (ESFI) encourages students to take preventative steps in protecting themselves and their possessions as millions across the nation head back to school.

"The risk of fire in college housing is greater than in housing used in the general population," said Nancy Nord, acting chairman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission at yesterday's announcement.

Brett Brenner, president of ESFI, commented that "the problem is compounded by the fact that students today require more energy than their predecessors." Many residence halls were built years ago, before every student arrived with a computer, iPod, microwave, refrigerator, fan, and cell phone. Some dorm wiring simply cannot handle the electrical demands of a typical student.

But, there are ways to stay safe and ESFI says that education is the key.

Here are some facts that may surprise you.

- A halogen lamp may reach temperatures hot enough to ignite curtains or blankets that are too close.
- Extension cords can short circuit, overheat and ignite if they are under carpets, if they have furniture resting on them, or if they are bunched up behind hot computer equipment.
- Toaster ovens get hot enough on the outside to burn and to ignite notebooks and any loose papers they may come in contact with.

Tips to avoid fires in your dorm:

1. Be cautious when using cooking appliances and space heaters. Appliances which heat use more electricity and are more likely to cause overloads than things that don't.
2. Use common sense and be aware of warning signs. If an appliance cord is hot to the touch, if the lights flicker or if the circuit breaker continues to trip, these are all signs that there is likely a problem.
3. Read and follow the manufactures directions and instructions.
4. If you should suspect an issue contact your resident advisor or certified service personnel.

ESFI reminds everyone that electricity is a powerful tool. It can also be a lethal hazard. Better safety standards have reduced electrical hazards that cause deaths, injuries and property damage. But good safety habits are still the best prevention against electrical hazards.

For more information, ESFI's college safety brochure and other electrical safety tips are available for downloading free of charge from ESFI's website at www.electrical-safety.org. Print copies can also be ordered through ESFI's website or by calling 703-841-3229.

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