

Wise use of electrical appliances advised

Modern electrical appliances may be convenient, but they're far from infallible when it comes to safety. Appliances have become increasingly efficient and sophisticated, yet even today's high-tech equipment poses threats to consumers who don't exercise caution.

For instance, the automatic shut-off feature is standard on some irons and electric kettles. How many customers worry about its reliability? Not enough, maintains Don Grant.

A claims adjuster for Wellington Insurance in Halifax, Don relates the story of a woman who received a mid-morning call at her office to inform her of a fire in her home. The culprit? A malfunctioning automatic shut-off feature.

While there were no injuries in this case, there was considerable and costly smoke damage. "I make it a personal habit to unplug all appliances that aren't used on a continuous basis," says Don. "No electrical appliance is perfect. A healthy dose of scepticism and practical preventative measures can save lives and money."

That goes for stoves in particular, which usually operate on 240 volts of electricity. Keep your stove clean and don't try to avoid cleaning by using aluminum foil to line the oven and burner pans. The foil concentrates and reflects the heat, changes

the air flow, collects fat and grease in pockets, and, if it touches the wires, can cause a short - all of which can lead to a fire.

In the laundry room, Don notes the importance of regularly clearing of the lint from the dryer vents. Dips and sags in the pipe that vents the hot air outside trap lint which has been responsible for fatal fires. While you're at it, Don suggests checking on the condition of water hoses, or better yet - turning off the water taps each time the washing machine is used. "These hoses tend to deteriorate after years of use," he says, recalling the extensive damage to furniture, rugs, and baseboards caused by a burst washing machine hose in a home where the machine was on the main floor.

Other common appliance hazards are often related to misuse. Coffee makers are a good example. "Equipment designed to be used two or three times a day in the home, can't take the pressure of a continuous usage in an office or showroom," Don confirms, explaining that thermostats give out and increase the chance of a fire. Similarly, blow dryers are not designed to defrost freezers or dry ski-boots. The combination of electricity and water is always dangerous and sometimes deadly.

This month's Canadian Consumer - The Radio Edition - devotes one of

its daily broadcasts to electrical appliances, with safety tips provided by the Canada Safety Council and sponsored by Wellington Insurance. Exercise caution when buying used appliances, warns the Safety Council. They may not have been tested according to modern safety standards and should be checked out by a qualified repair shop or factory authorized repair depot.

More information on living safely with your electrical appliances is available from Wellington Insurance brokers or your provincial safety council.

TIPS FOR SAFE APPLIANCE USE

- Do not use two or more heating

appliances on the same circuit.

- Watch for signs of overheating, such as a burning odour or a hot outlet plug. It may be a sign that the thermostat is deteriorating or failing altogether.

- Unplug all small appliances when not in use and supervise them when they are operating.

- Use appliances only for what they were designed, following the manufacturer's instructions.

- Clean grease from oven, stove tops and walls on a regular basis. Grease and fat fires are a leading cause of domestic fires so keep a multi-purpose dry chemical extinguisher (type ABC) on the kitchen

wall in a readily accessible location.

- Never try to repair or tinker with an appliance when it is plugged in. Better yet, take it to a service outlet authorized by the manufacturer or return it to the manufacturer for servicing.

- Do not use second-hand appliances without first having them checked for wear or breakdown of safety features such as insulation and thermostats.

- Never saw or knock off the ground pin on a three-pronged plug. The ground drains electricity which leaks to the metal frame. If there is no ground wire, the first person to touch it becomes the ground.

Use soapy solution to prevent B.B.Q. fires

Faced with a reported tally of 125 propane barbecue fires in Ontario last summer, experts are suggesting a soapy solution to cut the risks for backyard chefs.

"The majority of incidents involved a leak of some kind and could have been prevented with a simple check using a soap-and-water solution," says Bob Clendinning, head of Fuels Safety Branch for the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR).

Whenever a tank of propane is reattached to a barbecue, the fuel-delivery system should be checked for leaks, Clendinning says. Mix enough liquid soap with water to make bubbles, then brush the solution over all connections and hoses. Turn on the gas at the tank - made sure the burner is turned off - and watch for bubbles. Worn 'O' rings at the tank connection are a frequent cause of leaks.

"Keep a jar of the solution with the rest of your barbecue gear. If it's handy, you'll be more likely to do the check everytime, and that habit could save you from serious injury.

Burners on barbecues that haven't been used recently should be cleaned out using a flexible brush. According to Clendinning, insects such as earwigs and spiders like to nest in the tubes inside burners and can clog the system.

When burners are blocked, gas can back up and cause a fire at the

control panel. Improper lighting practices are another concern for Clendinning's department and fire-safety officials province-wide. Never light a propane barbecue with lid closed. The gas may build up inside the closed unit. When lit it can cause an explosion powerful enough to blow the lid off, and could cause personal injury, Clendinning says. Once lit, a barbecue should be watched closely, particularly during the first few minutes, to ensure it's burning properly. "If the flame goes out, or is not lit," he says, "your barbecue will sit there spewing out propane gas. Any spark could cause an explosion." A pamphlet on propane barbecues produced by the consumer ministry contains a number of additional safety tips:

- Store propane cylinders away from all building openings and sources of ignition;

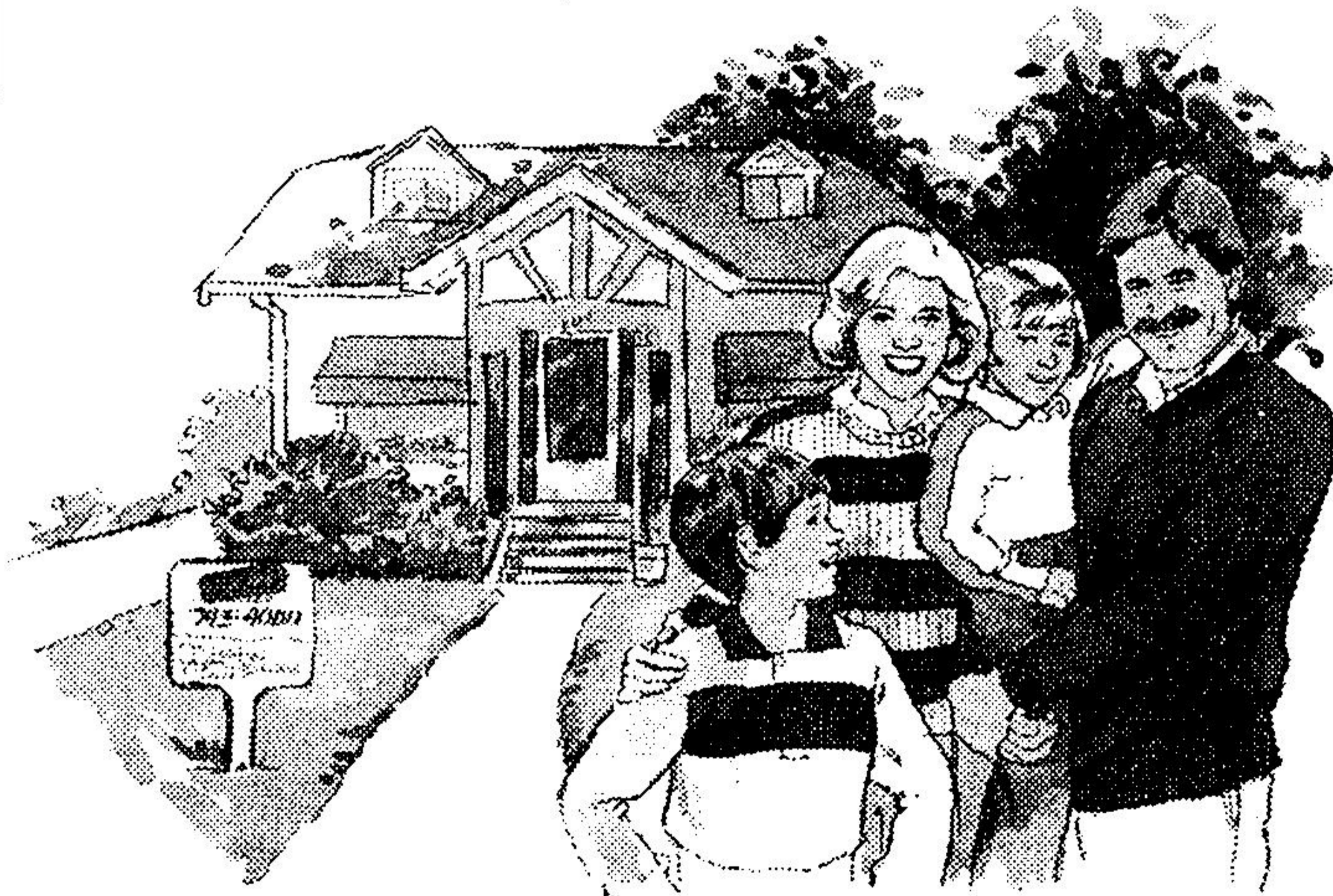
- always ensure the tanks are fitted with plastic safety plugs to guard against leaks when not in use;

- never transport cylinders in a closed trunk or in the car with the windows up. Even if you think the tank is empty, secure it upright in the trunk with the lid propped open; and,

- never store a propane cylinder inside.

For more information, copies of the MCCR brochure "Living Safely with Propane Appliances," can be obtained from the Consumer Information Centre at 555 Yonge St., Toronto, Ontario M7A 2H6.

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