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Observe Fireworks Safety to Ensure Good Fortune this Summer

Thousands of years ago in China, when running low on firewood, someone is believed to have thrown pieces of green bamboo into the fire. The bamboo blackened and began to sizzle and hiss; suddenly, it blew up! The unexpected loud bang naturally frightened those around the fire. Eventually, the theory goes, people decided that the exploding bamboo would probably scare evil spirits as well. So the first fireworks became part of the lunar New Year tradition as a means to chase away evil spirits and guarantee happiness and good fortune in the coming year. (See www.pyrouniverse.com).

Of course, fireworks have evolved considerably since that first piece of exploding bamboo, and now they are an integral part of a number of celebrations. But some things have not changed – fireworks remain both exciting and dangerous, and they need to be handled with great care. Although the Federal Hazardous Substances Act prohibits the sale of the most dangerous types of fireworks to consumers, every year people around the country manage to obtain them, and every year, stories of injuries surface on July 5th. The good news from the National Council on Fireworks Safety is that the injury rates from fireworks-related injuries have decreased by 70% over the past 10 years. However, approximately 8800 people still sustained such injuries in 2002, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Although 8800 injuries nationwide may not seem like a lot for an annual rate, it must be kept in mind that most of those injuries occur during the 1 or 2 days of the year when fireworks are used.

In 2000, Connecticut joined a number of states in allowing consumers to purchase and use “safe and sane” fireworks. These are defined by Connecticut law as “hand-held and ground based sparkling devices that are non-explosive and non-aerial, and do not contain more than 100 grams of pyrotechnic composition per item.” Although you must be at least 16 years old to purchase legal fireworks, many adults assume sparklers are safe and often give them to young children. One can only assume that neither the supervising adults nor the children are aware that sparklers can reach a temperature of 1800^o F. (hot enough to melt gold). In 2000, sparklers caused ¾ of the fireworks injuries in children under the age of 5, and accounted for 10% of all fireworks injuries. Further, “safe and sane” fireworks accounted for 17% of emergency room injuries, and “caused more injuries than illegal fireworks to pre-school children,” according to the National Fire Prevention Association. Parents can help to safeguard their children by teaching them not to use fireworks of any kind. If they find an unexploded firecracker on the ground, they must not touch it, but report it to an adult.

The number of fireworks injuries can be reduced even further by obeying the law and by using common sense when dealing with fireworks. It is unusual for people to be injured at public fireworks displays. The majority of injuries result from the misuse of consumer fireworks. The CPSC and the National Council on Firework Safety have joined forces to recommend the following safety tips:

- Buy from a reliable seller, and always read and follow label directions.
- Be sure an adult is always present, and that children are not allowed to light or play with any type of firework.
- Only use fireworks outdoors, and never under windy conditions. Point them away from buildings, dry leaves or other flammable material.
- Never shoot fireworks in metal or glass containers.
- Never point fireworks at people, and never throw fireworks from a vehicle.
- Always keep a bucket of water or a hose nearby.

- Never experiment or make your own fireworks.
- Light only one firework at a time, and never re-light a “dud.”
- Never carry fireworks in your pocket, and store them in a cool, dry place.
- Soak fireworks in water and then dispose of them in your trashcan.
- The shooter should always wear eye protection and be sure no body part is over the firework.
- Do not use in combination with drugs or alcohol.
- Stay away from illegal explosives.

To maximize both safety and enjoyment this Fourth of July, plan to attend one of the local fireworks displays offered by the surrounding communities. When attending a public display of fireworks, the American Pyrotechnics Association recommends that people respect safety barriers set up around the staging area, do not get too close (the best viewing distance is ¼ mile away), leave pets at home (the fireworks can scare them and may hurt their ears), and never pick up an unexploded firework – call the local police or fire department. As the CPSC advises, “Leave Fireworks to the Professionals!”

For additional information about fireworks safety, contact your local or state fire marshal or the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2822. Other sources of information include the National Council on Fireworks Safety (www.fireworksafety.com) at 202-349-7127, the National Fire Prevention Association on-line at www.nfpa.org, the American Pyrotechnic Association at www.americanpyro.com, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission at www.consumerproductsafetycommission.com.