

National Furniture Flammability Standard



Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How many deaths each year can be attributed to furniture fires?

A: According to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), about 10 **people die each week** in fires where upholstered furniture is the first item ignited. Most of these fires are caused by cigarette ignitions; small open flames such as matches, lighters and candles are responsible for a significant number of these fires. Fires originating in upholstered furniture account for roughly one-fifth of civilian fire deaths associated with residential structure fires each year. Flammability standards would be able to address upholstered furniture fires from both cigarette and small open flame ignitions.

Q: Why do we need a national furniture standard?

A: If furniture manufacturers made some small, inexpensive changes to the materials they use, they could save hundreds of lives and prevent thousands of serious injuries every year. Some already do, but most don't. Each and every day across the United States, people suffer from severe burns or are killed as a result of fires originating in one of the most flammable items in our homes—the couches and chairs that they relax and sit on. In a matter of minutes, a sofa fire can engulf an entire room in flames, filling the home with thick, dark smoke and toxic gases.

After more than a dozen years of deliberation and research, the CPSC has yet to set mandatory federal fire safety standards for upholstered furniture.

Q: What are some of the societal costs of furniture fires?

A: The CPSC's most recent data are from 1999 to 2002 and provide an accurate enough indication of just how costly furniture fires are to our society. During that period the CPSC estimated that a flammability standard could address an annual average of approximately 4,800 residential fires in which upholstered furniture was the first item to ignite. These fires resulted in an estimated 360 deaths, 740 civilian injuries, and \$133 million in property damage. The total annual societal cost attributable to these upholstered furniture fire losses was more than \$2 billion. This total includes fires ignited by small open-flame sources and cigarettes.

Q: What are the principal causes of upholstered furniture fires?

A: The two principal causes of fatal furniture fires are smoking materials and small open-flame sources, such as candles, matches and lighters.

Q: How flammable is upholstered furniture?

A: Upholstered furniture is one of the most flammable items in the American home. In just minutes, a sofa fire can engulf an entire living room in flames, filling the home with thick, dark smoke and toxic gases. Temperatures can exceed 1,400°F in a short period of time. What makes a sofa soft is what makes it dangerous. Polyurethane foam is called solid gasoline for a reason. Subjected to as little heat as a birthday candle, it melts and emits highly flammable and toxic gases in a matter of seconds. Some covering materials used with upholstered furniture actually make the problem worse, depending on what is used.

Q: When did NASFM first approach CPSC about adopting mandatory national standards?

A: In 1993, the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM) petitioned the CPSC to adopt new mandatory standards, based on test methods from California that would address cigarette ignitions and open flame ignitions. The CPSC voted to initiate a rulemaking in mid-1994, at first just looking at a potential small open flame ignition standard. In 2003, the CPSC expanded the rulemaking to include a potential cigarette ignition standard. However, the CPSC has not yet actually proposed regulations.

Q: After more than a dozen years, why hasn't the CPSC passed a furniture flammability standard?

A: We are asking the same question. Upholstery in airplanes, hotels, nursing homes, hospitals and even prisons is required to be fire resistant, but outside of California, there is no flammability standard for upholstered furniture sold for use in the home. We know these are complex issues. But we have a great deal of faith that the furniture industry can rise to the challenge and allow people to come before profits. For about the cost of a pizza, furniture manufacturers can include technologies that will help prevent fires in the couches and chairs in homes throughout the United States.

Q: How can furniture be made more fire resistant?

A: There are many ways to make furniture more fire resistant. It comes down to a choice of materials and the way a particular upholstered chair or couch is built. Certainly, flame retardant chemicals may be used here. The US Environmental Protection Agency and the National Academy of Sciences have assured us that many are safe to use. But there are some materials that are naturally fire resistant and new fire blockers are now on the market. These are choices that are made every day by furniture producers.

Q: Do any states have mandatory fire safety regulations for upholstered furniture?

A: California is the only state with fire safety regulations for upholstered furniture sold for use in homes. According to the California Bureau of Home Furnishings there was a 25% drop in deaths involving upholstered furniture after these standards were put into place in the 1970s. National flammability standards for cigarette and open flame ignitions could take advantage of technological advancements since the California standards were originally enacted.

Several others states have tough requirements for upholstered furniture used in hospitals, nursing homes, hotels and prisons. Yes, prisoners are safer than most of us are from upholstered furniture fires.

Q: What should consumers be aware of when buying new furniture?

A: They should look for a label that says that a piece of upholstered furniture meets the standard known as California Technical Bulletin 117 or TB 117. Such companies as LA-Z-Boy do this right now. If a consumer is buying a custom piece of furniture, they should ask that it meet TB 117 at a minimum and, preferably, a more effective standard known as Technical Bulletin 133.

Q: What can furniture manufacturers do to adopt a national fire standard?

A: A handful of furniture retailers sell products that meet the California standards nationwide. We invite the upholstered furniture industry to step up and agree to effective mandatory national furniture flammability standards in which both fabrics and fillings are made resistant to ignition by cigarettes and small open flames.

It's a funny thing about competition. The auto industry said airbags were unaffordable. The mattress industry said that fire safety standards would add hundreds of dollars to the price of each mattress. Consumers are still buying lots of cars and mattresses.

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Q: Are there environmental and health risks associated with furniture fire safety standards?

A: We are determined to ensure that flame retardant chemicals that pose unacceptable risks to people's health and the environment are not used, but we are equally determined that the proper use of good and appropriate flame retardants will not be sacrificed in the name of political correctness. We enjoy close working relationships with world renowned health and environmental toxicologists, and they join the CPSC in assuring us that there are many fire retardant chemicals that can be used with confidence in upholstered furniture.