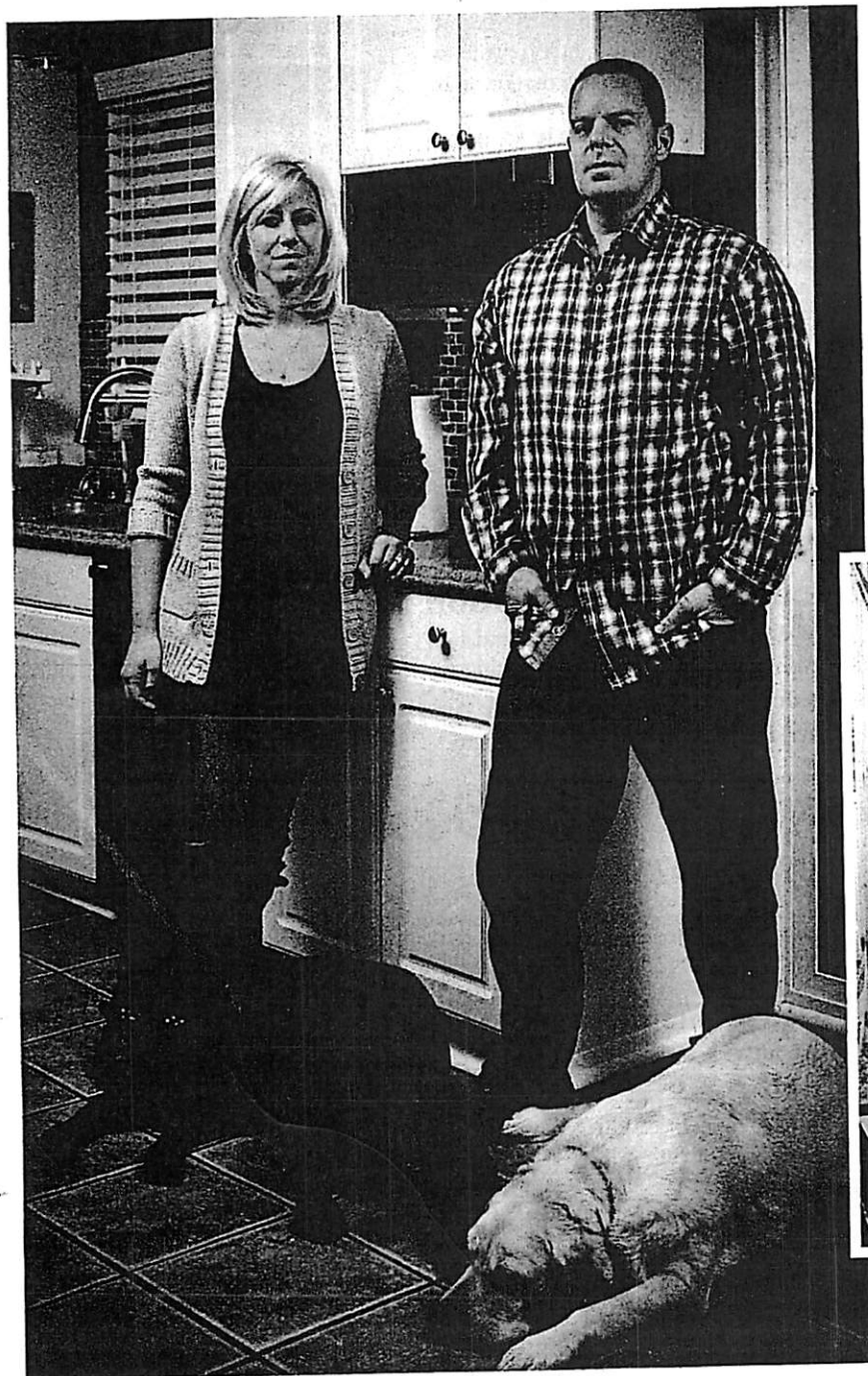


Appliance fires: Is your home safe?

Millions of dishwashers, fridges, ranges, and more are on recall lists



RON AND STACY NICOL were enjoying a Fourth of July family picnic in 2008, about an hour's drive from their home in Oakland Township, Mich., when they got the call every homeowner dreads. The local sheriff's department reported that a fire had broken out at the Nicols' condo, where their two Labrador retrievers and a lifetime of possessions were trapped.

By the time the couple got home, firefighters had extinguished the blaze, after a daring neighbor rescued their soot-covered dogs. But the kitchen was destroyed, along with Ron Nicol's collection of 375 cookbooks and paperwork from his training as a chef. Fire, smoke, and water had ravaged almost everything, and just a few months before their first child, Sienna, was born.



AFTERMATH The Nicols moved to a new home left, after their kitchen was destroyed in a fire that officials say started in a microwave oven that was not in use.

"It was not the kind of fireworks you want to see on the Fourth of July," says Ron Nicol, whose lingering sense of anger and loss is fueled by the unusual circumstances of the fire. Though the couple hadn't cooked that morning and were just back from a 10-day vacation, the official cause of the fire, according to fire department and county sheriff reports, was their over-the-range GE microwave oven.

A months-long investigation by their insurance company finally ruled the fire an accident, but the report was not more detailed. The Nicols learned of a class-action suit filed in 2009 against GE, alleging that some of its microwave ovens had started up by themselves and caused fires. They're considering joining the suit, but the Nicols don't ever expect to fully recover their losses, which well exceeded their insurer's standard contents coverage. "It got to be too disheartening, so we stopped tallying the losses after \$18,000," he says.

It could have been worse. The Consumer Product Safety Commission, using estimates from 2006 through 2008, says that major appliances caused more than 150,000 residential fires each year, resulting in 3,670 injuries, 150 deaths, and \$547 million dollars in property damage.

Human error certainly plays a role, especially in fires involving cooking appliances and clothes dryers. But when CONSUMER REPORTS conducted an in-depth

■ DID YOU KNOW?

23%

That's the percentage of appliance fires clearly attributable to mechanical, electrical, or design problems, according to our analysis of data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System.

analysis of federal fire data, we found that only about half of appliance fires could be blamed on human mistakes, such as unattended cooking, or natural causes such as storms or animals. Much of the rest appear to be due to problems with the appliances themselves, according to our review of safety records, fire reports, and court documents. Among the findings:

- More than 15 million appliance units have been recalled in the past five years for defects that could cause a fire, according to our analysis of CPSC records, with 1,942 incidents reported. Almost half of the recalled units were dishwashers, and the CPSC told us that it is investigating the problem. The large number of recalls is a sobering reminder of how important it is for consumers to register their products with manufacturers so that they receive

notices if the product is recalled.

- Recalled products aren't the only concern. When we analyzed data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) from 2002 through 2009, the latest available, we found more than 69,000 fires in which an appliance was the primary cause. (The CPSC's larger estimate is a national extrapolation that includes more structures, such as hotels and dorms, and many smaller, confined fires.) Digging deeper, we found at least 15,700 fires clearly linked to problems with a product, much greater than the instances involved in recalls. The number could be closer to 35,000 if you consider cases in which there were either no contributing causes or they were undetermined.

- Since the CPSC's March 2011 launch of SaferProducts.gov, a database for consumers to report problems and review product-safety complaints, more than 850 reports about appliance fires have been posted.

- Companies that are taken to court by consumers over defective products frequently use legal tactics to keep safety information secret. If the companies petition, courts will often shield safety information included in pretrial discovery. And if companies settle a lawsuit, the agreements are often confidential.

- More safety measures could be built into appliances to help prevent fires. Early-warning technologies are possible for

8 ways to protect yourself

■ **Register new appliances.** That way you should be notified promptly if a product is recalled. Appliances usually come with a registration card for you to fill out and mail to the company, or you can register on the manufacturer's website or by phone. Worried about junk mail? Then you can just provide your name, contact information, and model number.

■ **Check for recalls.** You can find a central website for several government agencies at www.recalls.gov, and some let you sign up for alerts. If you move into a home with existing appliances, record their make and model and check the websites for recalls. Also review consumers' experiences with those products at www.saferproducts.gov. And if you experience a problem, report it on the same website and let us know at ReportApplianceFires@CR.consumer.org.

■ **Install fire-prevention equipment.** Almost two-thirds of home fire deaths occur in homes that lack working smoke alarms.

Each level of your home and every bedroom should have one. We recommend smoke alarms having both photoelectric and ionization sensors to provide the fastest response to any type of fire. We also recommend you keep one full-floor fire extinguisher (rated 2-A:10-B:C or greater) on every level, plus a smaller supplemental unit in the kitchen.

■ **Inspect power cords.** Look out for frayed power cords and never route electric cords (including extension cords) under carpeting, where they can overheat or be damaged by furniture.

■ **Check your home's wiring.** The electrical wiring in older homes can't always handle the demands of modern appliances. Have your system inspected by a qualified electrician. They might recommend arc-fault circuit interrupters, which detect dangerous arcing of electrical currents caused by damaged wires, faulty appliances, and other problems. The upgrade might cost several

hundred dollars, but considering that 30,000 fires are caused each year by arcing faults, it may be worth the expense.

■ **Practice kitchen safety.** Unattended cooking is a common fire-starter, whether you are using a range or a microwave oven. If small children are home, maintain a kids-free-zone of at least 3 feet and use back burners when possible. Unplug small appliances, including toasters and coffeemakers, when they're not in use or you are away for long periods.

■ **Clear range hoods.** Grease buildup in range hoods is another fire hazard, so be sure to clean the vents regularly.

■ **Keep dryer vents clear.** Clean your dryer's lint screen regularly to avoid lint buildup, which was listed as a factor in many fires. Use rigid metal dryer ducts instead of flexible ducts made of foil or plastic, which can sag and let lint build. And check them regularly to remove any lint buildup.

some appliances, such as clothes dryers, which had 13,723 fires in our analysis of NFIRS data. Lint buildup was cited as a factor in 2,609 of those cases.

Andrea Gabor, a quality-management expert and Bloomberg Professor of Business Journalism at the City University of New York's Baruch College, who has studied the appliance, automobile, and electronics industries, says the number of appliance fires isn't surprising. "We've seen a race to the bottom in terms of cheap parts and disposable products," she says.

But manufacturers such as GE defend their products as safe: "GE and its suppliers design and manufacture safe, high-quality major appliances that meet or exceed government and industry standards," the company says. "GE continuously reviews those products for possible improvements."

Increased complexity

Appliance design has come a long way from the days of pilot lights, rotating dials, and push-button controls. You'd be hard-pressed to find a gas range today without electronic ignition or a microwave oven that doesn't have touchpad controls. Those innovations make appliances easier to use, but the complexity can also lead to other problems.

"If you compare a first-generation blender that had only an on/off switch with one today that has 14 speeds and a data-storage center [microprocessor], there's a lot more that can go wrong with the newer unit," says Stuart Lipoff, vice president of publications at the Institute of Electrical

DID YOU KNOW?

7.3million

That's the number of dishwasher units that have been involved in CPSC recalls over the past five years because of fire hazards.

and Electronics Engineers (IEEE).

That point is echoed by fire investigator Jack Sanderson, president of Fire Findings, a forensic engineering laboratory in Benton Harbor, Mich. He says that more refrigerators are ending up in his labs for analysis. "It usually has to do with components associated with new compressors," he says. "I can't tell you what the problem is exactly, but manufacturers have obviously made a design change that's having unintended consequences."

People don't normally think of refrigerators as posing much fire danger, but Sanderson says they have heaters and draw plenty of current. And once the electrical components catch fire, he says, plastics in the rest of the appliance provide more fuel.

In fact, in one of the biggest appliance recalls in our review, 1.6 million Maytag refrigerators were recalled in March 2009 because of an electrical failure in the relay, the component that turns on the compressor. The biggest recall in our analysis was for 2.5 million GE dishwashers in May

2007, with 191 reports of overheated wiring because of a short circuit. In 12 cases, fire spread beyond the dishwasher.

There were several cases of devices that could turn on by themselves, including the October 2010 recall of 122,000 Electrolux-manufactured cooktops and ranges that could unexpectedly auto-start if liquids pooled under their control knobs. The 70 reported incidents included three fires resulting in property damage and three that caused burns. Hamilton Beach toasters were recently recalled because they could turn on when first plugged in.

The NFIRS, which is maintained by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, provides more extensive information on fires and their causes, collecting fire reports from about 23,000 departments nationwide. We sorted through 1.6 million fire records from 2002 through 2009 to analyze more than 69,000 appliance fires in single-family and multifamily dwellings. When we excluded human error and natural conditions, such as damage from storms or animals, we found up to 35,297 cases that could be due to electrical, mechanical, or design problems. More than 15,700 fires were clearly attributable to those problems, and much of the remainder probably were because the appliance was identified as the primary source of ignition, with contributing causes listed as "none" or "undetermined."

The most incidents were attributed to ranges, followed by dryers, air conditioners, refrigerators, and dishwashers. The NFIRS is the largest national database of fires but participation is voluntary and varies

By the numbers: Fires and their causes

Products	Total fires 2002-09	Fires linked to electrical or other problems*	SafeProducts.gov complaints related to fires in 2011	Recalled units 2007-11	Common problems reported
Ranges	44,708	16,824	293	176,600	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stove left unattended. • Self-starting controls.
Clothes dryers	13,723	8,717	29	5,200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lint blockage. • Gas leaks.
Microwave ovens	2,308	1,705	81	135,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running without food inside.
Refrigerators	1,514	1,514	149	1.6 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relay switch short-circuit. • Light bulb stays on when door is shut.
Toasters and toaster ovens	1,335	902	36	1.2 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toaster can turn on by itself. • Mechanism jams while toasting.
Dishwashers	1,015	1,015	199	73 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control-panel problems. • Liquid rinse-aid leaks into circuitry.
Washing machines	657	657	15	632,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water leakage can cause a circuit-board fire.

Source: Analysis of fires from NFIRS database, complaints from SaferProducts.gov, and recalls and problems from CPSC records.

*Includes manufacturing, mechanical, and design defects and contributing causes listed as "none" or "undetermined".



POSTED A consumer sent a photo of this destroyed dishwasher to SaferProducts.gov

yearly, so it was not possible to use that data alone to determine national trends over time.

The safety concerns arise as more appliances, or their components, are manufactured abroad. Almost four of every five recalls in our tally involved products made outside of the U.S., with the majority coming from China. John Drengenberg, safety director with Underwriters Laboratory (UL), which tests and certifies appliances and other products, says there can be a "distance barrier and a language barrier" between U.S. producers and foreign suppliers. "We investigate every recall," he says. "Very often the problem can be traced back to a substandard part that's coming from an outside supplier."

Gabor, the Baruch College professor, who wrote a biography of quality guru W. Edwards Deming, says, "The best manufacturers work very closely with their suppliers on everything from the design of components to their implementation in the final product."

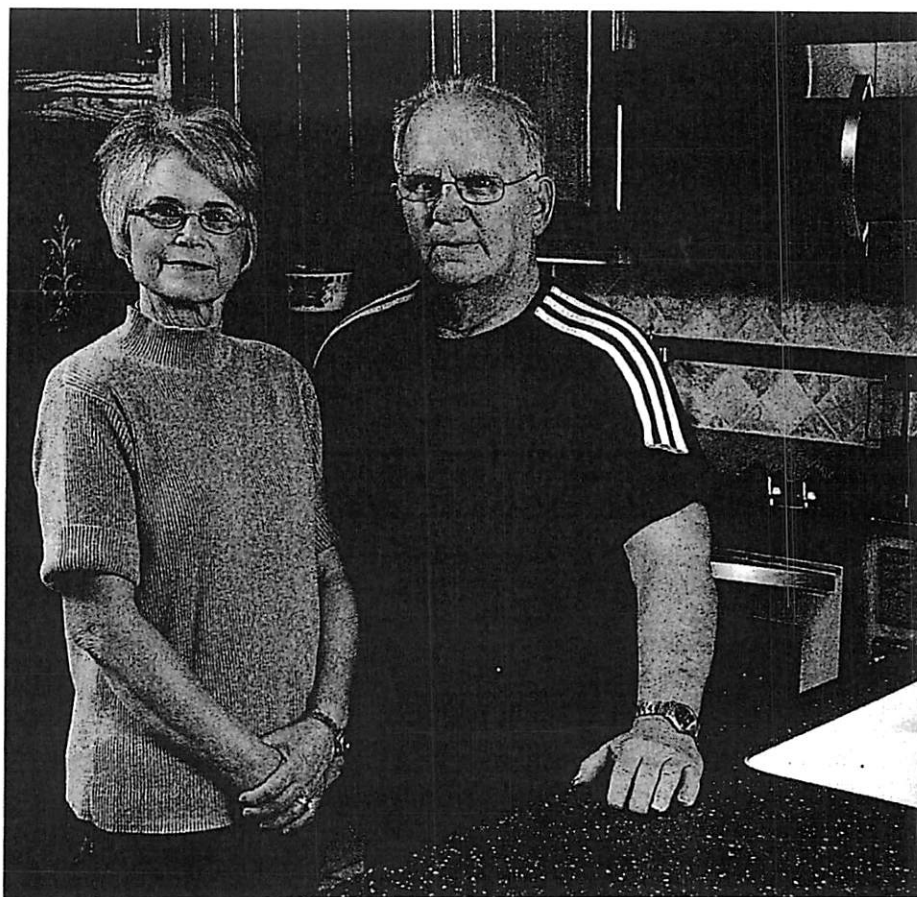
Industry officials insist that standards are the same whatever the parts' origins, whether made domestically or in China. Whirlpool, which bought Maytag in 2006, says in a statement, "The same safety system applies regardless of the source of our products or components."

Who's watching the store?

The majority of safety standards for appliances are voluntary, developed by a consensus of consumer groups, government agencies, producers, retailers, and suppliers. UL and other testing labs certify products for companies to make sure they meet certain standards. ASTM International and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) provide a framework to develop those standards.

If the CPSC feels that voluntary measures are not adequately protecting consumers, it can ask standards-setting bodies to make standards tougher. And if that doesn't happen or if the CPSC has concerns about compliance, it can start a rule-making process for tougher mandatory standards.

But in that kind of system, responsibility can be unclear. Len Morrissey, a director at ASTM International, says, "We have not taken up the issue of appliance fires. It doesn't fall under the jurisdiction of what we typically do." Susanah Doucet, ANSI communications manager, says her organization doesn't specialize in appliance



MICROWAVE MYSTERY Kermit and JoAnna Moreau of Lumberton, Texas, say electrical arcing ruined their GE microwave oven even though it wasn't being used at the time.

fires and that they fall more under the purview of UL or the National Fire Protection Association.

But fire investigator Sanderson says, "Saying something is UL listed is just not adequate. That's a bare minimum."

UL's Drengenberg says, "We've made great strides, but our mission is to eradicate the risk of appliance fires completely. To that end, we are constantly evaluating our standards to see if modifications could be made to better protect consumers."

The CPSC has authority to work with companies on recalls but has limitations in other realms. It agrees that regulations in China, for example, are not as stringent as many U.S. rules. "We're sending technical experts to Beijing to do training sessions with our offices there aimed at building safety into the products," says CPSC spokesman Scott Wolfson. "One key element of this is adhering with U.S. safety standards, and we don't discriminate between voluntary and mandatory standards. We want Chinese manufacturers complying with both."

Wolfson says the CPSC has not yet engaged directly with Chinese manufacturers and importers in the appliance sector the

way it has with factories that make toys and fireworks. Instead, the commission is working with trade associations and foreign government quality-control entities.

The potential for problems is one reason consumers need to make sure they are aware of product recalls. With 130 million households in the country filled with multiple appliances, the recalls we analyzed of 15 million appliances represent only a fraction of what's out there. But consumers still need to pay attention to protect themselves. A majority of people said they never or rarely mail in product registration cards, according to a 2010 survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. And almost a third of those who owned a recalled product took no action. But manufacturers and retailers could do more, for example, by providing postage-paid registration cards and by using the contact information they already have to notify customers of a recall.

Consumers voice concerns

SaferProducts.gov, a website run by the CPSC, provides vivid detail about what consumers are experiencing. Launched in March 2011, it posts consumer complaints

within 20 days after notifying the manufacturers involved and giving them a chance to respond. Several thousand complaints have been posted to the website, including more than 850 related to appliance fires, our analysis discovered. For example, we found that consumers reported at least 149 refrigerator-related fires, involving at least 16 injuries.

From a June 16, 2011, report: "This evening our kitchen filled with smoke. We called the fire department. The fireman determined that our 7-year-old Whirlpool Gold side-by-side refrigerator caught fire. The condenser overheated and the surrounding wiring and plastic ignited ... After the incident, I searched on-line and saw that our refrigerator fire was not the first." Whirlpool did not respond to the posting.

Our review found 39 fires related to coffeemakers, with two injuries. Here's an incident from June 23: "My husband made coffee this morning as usual. When he returned to get a cup he found the coffee to be boiling in the carafe and the unit to be smoking." One report cited concerns about the recall system. In a report of a dishwasher fire on July 4, 2011, the consumer says, "We had a Bosch dishwasher that was included in the 2009 recall. Though we sent our registration card in, we were never notified by Bosch of a recall."

SaferProducts.gov has proved to be a useful forum for sharing safety concerns, but it has encountered resistance from companies that contend the information publicly posted is unverified. In October 2011, an unnamed company went to U.S. District Court in Maryland and sued to block the CPSC from posting a consumer's report of harm allegedly caused by one of the company's products. Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, has joined other groups in asking the court to deny the company's motion.

"A challenge to an important product-safety law should not proceed in secret just because the company wants to avoid bad publicity about one of its products," says Scott Michelman, a lawyer for Public Citizen, representing the groups. As of press time, no hearing had been scheduled.

The tactics of secrecy

Companies also use legal strategies to cloak product-safety information when cases reach the stage of a lawsuit.

Like the Nicols, Timothy Hennigan of Rochester Hills, Mich., says he had a problem



AWAITING ANSWERS Elizabeth Loba of Cary, N.C., says that her KitchenAid dishwasher caught fire over the Thanksgiving weekend, and that she has been frustrated with the company's response.

with a GE microwave that started up on its own, causing smoke and sparks. He filed a class-action suit in U.S. District Court in Eastern Michigan, alleging that GE has known that its microwaves were defective since at least 2002. The case hinges in part on a series of presentations made to GE's Microwave Safety Council between 2005

Safety problems can be hidden away in lawsuits.

and 2009, allegedly containing reports of specific problems involving microwave ovens and opinions regarding the cause of self-starts and fires, according to the federal court papers.

But the presentation documents themselves are sealed under a protective court order. Companies often use that stratagem, claiming trade secrets or competitive injury, according to legal experts. "Protective orders were designed for sensitive information like medical records and financial information," says Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for

Freedom of the Press. "But in an effort to speed along cases, judges rubber-stamp the requests without doing the careful analysis needed to determine what is sealable and what is not."

The GE case went to mediation in mid-December 2011. No action had been taken as of press time. When we asked for detail of the case from GE, a spokeswoman responded that "as a matter of policy, GE does not comment on pending litigation."

Outside parties can try to obtain protected information by filing an access motion under the First Amendment, but such litigation might cost as much as \$50,000, with a 50/50 chance of success at best. "Mainstream media outfits used to fight for disclosure, but most of them no longer have the money or the resources," Dalglish says.

Kermit Moreau of Lumberton, Texas, had a similar experience with a GE microwave. He was home one afternoon in June 2010 when he heard a strange noise in the kitchen. "Our GE microwave had turned on and the electric arcing was so violent that the turntable had cracked and the bottom of the unit was scorched," he says. GE came to pick up the unit, he says, but

he has not heard from the company since.

Settling cases out of court is another way to keep potentially compromising information from reaching the public. Take the class action filed against LG in 2010, alleging that certain French-door refrigerators contain a defect that causes their interior light to stay on, presenting a fire hazard to consumers. LG submitted an October 2011 settlement in which it agreed to reimburse consumers' out-of-pocket expenses for repairs related to the interior light. But the settlement has not resulted in a product recall, nor does LG "concede any infirmity or weakness in its defenses or its products." But complaints about LG refrigerators continue to pile up online, including several SaferProducts.gov postings involving models covered in the settlement.

Another settlement by LG involved a 2006 fire in Floresville, Texas, that resulted in the death of Christina Arocha, 32, and her two sons, 8-year-old Jonathan and 2-year-old Nicholas. The cause of the fire was cited as undetermined on the official fire incident report, but survivors brought suit against LG, Sears, and the local power company, claiming that the ignition source was either an LG microwave, a Sears freezer, or faulty electrical service. A confidential settlement was reached with LG in 2007 before any theories about defects were developed beyond general allegations. The other defendants also settled out of court, according to Joseph Dunn, the plaintiffs' attorney.

A more recent class action was filed against Whirlpool in November 2011. It alleges that a defective circuit board in two brands of Whirlpool-produced dishwashers can cause the units to overheat, emit smoke, and even erupt into flames. The lead plaintiff in the case, Steve Chambers of Frederick, Md., says he saw his KitchenAid dishwasher on fire in March 2009 just minutes after it started a wash cycle.

He contacted Whirlpool, which he says refused to investigate or to refund the cost of the ruined appliance. Chambers then started the website KitchenAidFire.com, which contains more than 400 consumer reports of dishwasher fires.

Elizabeth Lobo of Cary, N.C., added her story to the website in November 2011, reporting that her KitchenAid dishwasher's control board had caught fire over the Thanksgiving weekend. "The repairman said he had never seen anything like it," Lobo says, adding that the repairman wouldn't fix the unit unless

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True or False: (Check your answers below)

	True	False
1. Everyone should have an exercise stress test for their heart	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Avocados are one of the best fruits for your heart	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. A simple test on your legs can help prevent a heart attack	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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1. No, most people can do without an exercise stress test.

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she signed a liability release because he believed the dishwasher would continue to pose a fire hazard. Lobo's calls to KitchenAid ended in frustration. "To be honest, they were really horrible," she says. "They had absolutely no regard for the danger of the situation and seemed concerned only about gathering data for a legal case. As a single mom with two young children, I was livid."

Rick Retallick of Fredericton, New Brunswick, says that his Whirlpool dishwasher filled with smoke and sparks in December 2010. "My big concern is that we normally set the dishwasher to run at night while we're asleep," Retallick says. "We're just lucky that we were running it earlier that night while we were still up." He says Whirlpool sent a truck to get the dishwasher, but he has heard nothing since.

Because litigation is pending in the Chambers case, Whirlpool said it could not comment on specifics, but spokeswoman Kristine Vernier says, "Whirlpool Corporation builds its dishwashers with, among many other state-of-the-art safety features, components that turn off power to the electronic control board in the extremely unlikely event that the control board begins to overheat. The safety features are designed to limit potential damage to the unit."

DID YOU KNOW?

18 years

That's how long it has been since legislation was introduced in Congress to make it harder for companies to shield product-safety information in civil cases.

Toward safer products

Manufacturers have made significant design enhancements in the past to improve safety—automatic shutoff on coffeemakers, for example, and the antijamming mechanics on toasters. But there's a lot more that could be done to improve appliance safety. Here are four areas:

Dryers. Approximately 7,000 fires, 200 injuries, and 10 deaths are attributed each year to dryer fires, according to CPSC estimates. A new voluntary standard that takes effect in March 2013 will require that fires starting inside the tumbler or base of the chassis be contained within the dryer. Industry should now address one of the biggest causes of dryer fires: the ignition of accumulated lint. A 2011 study by the CPSC concluded that status indicators,

akin to the "check engine" lights on automobiles, could be a reminder to empty lint filters and alert consumers to mechanical failures. Although the results of our test with standard-equipment lint detectors were inconsistent, an aftermarket system we reported on in 2011 worked.

Cooking equipment. Forty percent home fires relate to cooking equipment, the CPSC says. Since at least the mid-1980s, engineers have been trying to come up with a technology that would detect fires before they start, for example, monitoring stovetop temperatures, which are a reliable indicator of pending ignition. "There was a big push by the CPSC and others to develop these sensors, but the technology was never refined enough to the point where it was considered reliable," says the UL's Drengenberg. The CPSC still believes in the technology enough that it's paying a private contractor \$300,000 to develop a viable solution.

Electromagnetic interference. In 2009, a Magic Chef gas range in a Brooklyn, N.Y., home was mistakenly being turned on by a mobile digital device. Whirlpool, which owns Maytag, confirmed that the range required a suppressor to keep signals from the device from firing it up. Stories like that are rare, but because of the ever-increasing use of mobile devices and electronic-enhanced appliances, preventing electromagnetic interference (EMI) is more important than ever.

"It's hard to find an appliance these days that's not supported by some kind of microcomputer," says the IEEE's Lipo. "If that device isn't specifically tested, wires could act like an antenna, picking up electromagnetic interference that could be the equivalent of pressing the start button." The Federal Communications Commission regulates how much electromagnetic interference certain appliances generate but not how much they receive. The European Union regulates both. Most U.S. manufacturers do their own EMI testing, which can be more stringent than the standards.

Better tracking data. Appliances usually have manufacturer stickers indicating when and where they were built, but those stickers can be destroyed in fires. Fire investigator Jack Sanderson suggests requiring a code stamped onto a nondestructible component of appliances for tracking purposes. In addition, although the form that the NFIRS uses to gather and analyze fire reports has a field for app

Do you own a recalled appliance?

Largest recalls for fire hazards since 2007. For details go to www.cpsc.gov.

Date	Company	Product	Units recalled
5/16/07	GE Consumer & Industrial	GE, Eterna, Hotpoint, and Kenmore dishwashers	2,500,000
2/1/07	Maytag	Maytag and Jenn-Air dishwashers	2,300,000
6/3/10	Maytag	Maytag dishwashers	1,700,000
3/10/09	Maytag	Maytag, Jenn-Air, Amana, Admiral, Magic Chef, Performa by Maytag, and Crosley refrigerators	1,600,000
5/20/10	Walmart	GE 12-cup digital coffee makers	900,000
4/24/08	Waxcessories	Simmer pots	830,000
6/23/09	Applia Consumer Products	Black & Decker Spacemaker coffeemakers	584,000
4/6/09	Atico International USA	Signature Gourmet 12-cup programmable coffee-makers and Kitchen Gourmet 10-cup coffeemakers	500,000
3/6/08	Hamilton Beach	Hamilton Beach and Proctor Silex Toasters	482,000
1/15/09	BSH Home Appliances	Bosch and Siemens dishwashers	476,500
06/30/11	Hamilton Beach	Hamilton Beach toasters	300,000
9/30/08	Walmart	GE Toasters	210,000
01/11/11	GD Midea Air Conditioning Equipment	GE and Professional Series dehumidifiers	198,000
11/7/07	Carrier	Carrier air conditioners and heat pumps	185,000

Source: Consumer Product Safety Commission

ance make-and-model information, fire departments could and should do a better job of entering the data when available.

The industry itself says it is using techniques to identify other hot spots in the home. "What really drives a product recall isn't actual incidences," says Larry Latack, Whirlpool's director of global products safety. "We've had recalls where there weren't any incidences, but our engineering analysis said we could expect them down the line."

What's ahead

The number of recalled appliance units can be a sign that surveillance is working, but Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of CONSUMER REPORTS, believes that the large number of recalls warrants a comprehensive examination of appliance fires, not just dishwasher fires, by the CPSC. The increased use of new technologies and materials sometimes present unforeseen risks. And Consumers Union supports the development of strong standards to improve appliance safety.

Consumers Union also support efforts to protect and promote SaferProducts.gov as a way to publicly provide early warning of potential product problems. Consumers should be encouraged to share their experiences with unsafe products on the website to provide real-life experiences that can contribute to safety.

Also important would be passage of the Sunshine in Litigation Act, which would limit the use of secrecy in the proceedings of civil cases involving safety concerns and in the settlement of those cases. Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., first introduced it 18 years ago and says it's still relevant today. "We are all familiar with cases where protective orders and secret settlements prevented the public from learning about the dangers of silicone breast implants, IUDs, a prescription painkiller, side-saddle gas tanks, defective heart valves, tires, and most recently, prescription drugs," Kohl says. "Had information about these harmful products not been sealed by court orders, injuries could have been prevented and lives could have been saved."

Could more attention help reduce appliance fires? "The more information we get, the more we have to go to companies and say we have a problem here," says CPSC spokesman Alex Filip. "Every single appliance fire concerns us, and we'll want to investigate the cause to determine if there was a product defect."

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