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Hazards in the home

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In a new study sponsored by the Home Safety Council and New York-based GarageTek, 33 percent of respondents said a garage-related injury had occurred in their homes, and nearly 60 percent of all garage users said they didn't dwell on the safety hazards in their garages.

The findings paint only a partial picture of the possible dangers existing in seemingly tranquil homes.

Bob Sisson, who runs "Inspections by Bob" (<http://www.inspectionsbybob.com/?Source=Independent>) in Boyds, says undetectable wiring hazards often lurk under the kitchen sink. Garbage disposal units typically involve a clamp at the bottom of the unit, but often that clamp is loose or a stray wire peeks out from it. "It's amazing what you find under kitchen sinks," Mr. Sisson says. Another hidden kitchen-related danger can be found at the sink's faucet.

Many homeowners set their water heater's thermostat at too high a temperature. The proper heating range is around 120 degrees, Mr. Sisson says, but often the heaters are cranked up as high as 140 degrees. It takes up to six minutes of exposure to 120-degree water for an adult male to get burned but only a few seconds for a burn to develop at the highest range, he says. "Children, women and the elderly burn much faster," he adds. The danger exists primarily for children, who may not pull their hands from a hot faucet in time to avoid a burn.

Another kitchen-based problem can be found with stoves that aren't properly secured. Stand-alone stoves should be anchored to the floor with an anti-tip bracket, he says, something many homeowners don't know. "If kids want to reach something on top of the stove and they don't feel like dragging a chair over, they'll open the oven door and stand on it," he says. "The whole stove comes crashing on top of them." A homeowner can test to see whether a bracket is in place by grabbing the back of the stove and pulling it forward.

"It shouldn't move," he says. Mike Plank, owner of the Richmond-based American Home Inspector Directory, says electrical problems can hide anywhere in a home.

"That's one of the most common reasons for house fires," Mr. Plank says regarding improper wiring. Having too many extension cords can be the culprit, but so, too, are antiquated electrical boxes under the home. In such hard-to-reach areas, wires sometimes literally can be hanging out for all to see -- and touch. "We've even seen them hanging out and hot," he says of these wires.

Homeowners occasionally attempt some quick additions to their house's electrical panel, which can lead to trouble. "Instead of putting a new breaker on, they'll add that wire onto the breaker. It's called a 'double tap,' and it's one of the most common things we see," he says. "Sometimes they use undergauged wire, which can overheat and start a fire."

A potential invisible threat in the home is radon, an odorless, colorless radioactive gas that is the second-leading cause of lung cancer, according to the U.S. Surgeon General's Office. Mr. Plank says homeowners can buy inexpensive radon inspection kits online that can ensure that radon levels aren't a concern.

Radon gas isn't the only invisible threat that could lurk in a home. Rod Burns from (<http://www.aaaqualityhomeinspections.com/>) AAA Quality Home Inspections in Baldwin, Md., says carbon monoxide detectors need to be placed near a home's furnace for maximum protection. Mr. Burns says furnaces or water heaters often are not properly serviced and can leak carbon monoxide very quickly.

One often-forgotten part of the house where plenty of hidden dangers await is the garage. Barbara Butensky, director of marketing for Syosset, N.Y.'s GarageTek, says most American garages are incredibly cluttered, and "that's where the danger is hidden." "In every other room, there are floor lamps and ceiling fixtures. The garage is one of our largest rooms with the least lighting," Ms. Butensky says, adding that this year's second annual Garage Safety Week runs through Sunday. Storing hazardous materials improperly is one of the biggest areas of concern for homeowners. Too often, gasoline is kept in old soda bottles or other "inappropriate containers," and children could mistake it for something to drink, she says.

Structurally speaking, a swarm of tiny insects could wreak plenty of damage if left untreated. Steve Larsen, owner of Larsen Design Build Associates in Alexandria, says termite inspections are required by law for home purchases, but what about homeowners who have been in their homes for 10 or 20 years? Termites might be hard if not impossible to spot, but homeowners can see signs the insects are hard at work, Mr. Larsen says. Some termites create "mud tubes" outside concrete foundations in order to move from place to place without coming up for air, he says.

Homeowners may not think of termites as flying creatures, but when they reproduce, they tend to swarm through the air for brief periods. "If you see a swarm of little tiny bugs, you have a problem," Mr. Larsen says, adding that the creatures' swarming period is relatively short before they return underground. Sometimes, homeowners all but invite termites into their homes. "If you have firewood for the house stored too close to the house, those [woodpiles] are termite magnets," he says. Mr. Plank says the best defense against hidden dangers is to periodically call in a professional even if nothing seems to be wrong at the time. "A lot of people do not do home maintenance. They're too busy or not capable. [Professionals] can help them look for things before they become bigger issues," Mr. Plank says.