

Fire Pits and Health

Fire pits, outdoor fireplaces for burning wood, are increasingly popular. Many residents are unaware though that they contribute to low level air pollution, and are subject to both state and local regulations. The following information is provided by the Sharon Board of Health and Sharon Fire Department to promote responsible use of fire pits in the community.



Health Issues

While outdoor fire pits provide warmth and light outdoors, they also contribute significantly to air pollution. Smoke from the fire pits—including fine particulates, gases, and related odors—may be irritating to neighboring residents, and dangerous to persons with respiratory diseases such as asthma. When used in small, sometimes dense neighborhoods, fire pits contribute to low level air pollution more likely to be inhaled by a resident than the smoke coming out of a chimney. The combustion process releases large amounts of carbon dioxide and other gases. Wind conditions may also contribute to smoke exposure. The increasing number of fire pits in use can contribute significantly to the increase in air pollution over a broad area. Open fires also contribute a significant safety risk if not monitored closely.

Local Regulation of Fire Pits

Fire pits are regulated by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and by the Sharon Board of Health. DEP regulations address fire pits as “open burning”, which is limited due to health and safety hazards. Answers to questions on open burning can be found on the DEP website at: <http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/massdep/air/quality/open-burning-answers-to-your-burning-questions.html> . Open fire pits are subject to these regulations, unless they are being used specifically to cook food outdoors, which is allowed. Fire pits cannot be used to burn trash, finished wood, grass, leaves, etc. The Sharon Fire Department enforces the DEP regulations related to open burning, including the use of fire pits.

The Sharon Board of Health also enforces regulations against open burning in fire pits through its Nuisance regulation, Article 4. The regulation is based on the Board's broad authority under M.G.L. c.111, s. 31C, Atmospheric pollution, to address environmental factors affecting health.

Safer Usage of Fire Pits

Help limit the environmental and health impacts of fire pits by observing the following guidelines:

- Keep outdoor fires for cooking, and limit their size, intensity and burning time.
- Locate fire pits away from combustible materials.
- Ensure that the outdoor fires pits are contained in a non-flammable enclosure.
- Fires should be tended by someone age 18 years or older.
- Burn only clean, dry firewood to minimize smoke particulates and chemical releases.

For more information, contact the Sharon Board of Health at (781) 784-1500 x 1260.