

Little-known dangers at gas pumps

From Elizabeth Cohen

CNN

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ATLANTA, Georgia (CNN) -- Few American motorists know that static electricity around gas pumps can ignite a deadly fire.

Ignacio Sierra has personal experience of that danger. He was pumping gasoline when his vehicle suddenly burst into flames with his daughter Esperanza inside.

"She started screaming," remembers Sierra. "I knew if I opened the door, the flames would start to go inside."

He did manage to get Esperanza out unharmed, but the fire ruined his car and destroyed the gas station.

Sierra set off the blaze by doing something many motorists do; he re-entered his car to retrieve money while the gas was still pumping.

His movement created friction against the car seat that built up static electricity in his body. Then when he exited the car and touched the gas pump nozzle, the electricity sparked and ignited the gas fumes coming from his car's gas tank.

About a dozen victims of static gas pump fires have talked to CNN. All said they had no idea this sort of fire was a possibility until it happened to them. And some say they will never put gas in their vehicles if their children are with them.

A woman who asked to be identified only as Carol said a static gas pump fire is blamed for burning her daughter so badly she needed skin grafts on her legs.



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Static gas pump fires

- Static electricity buildup more common in cool, dry air
- Static gas pump fires more common in the winter
- Static gas pump fires occur more often with women
- Static gas pump fires have been reported in 35 states

Carol had put the gas pump nozzle on automatic and re-entered her car to write a check. When her then-12-year-old daughter, wearing a sweater and jacket that may have created static electricity, reached for the nozzle, flames suddenly ignited her clothing.

The Petroleum Equipment Institute (PEI) has documented 129 such fires since the early 1990s.

All those fires infuriate electrical engineer Steven Fowler because he says they were all preventable.

"We have to accept the fact that refueling is dangerous. We can't hide that from the public anymore," said Fowler, a static electricity expert.

The solution, he said, is to put up stickers that read "touch me." The stickers are placed over metal and when people touch them, their bodies discharge static electricity safely.

But Fowler said no gas stations plan to put them up, except for the SPINX Oil Company chain of 80 stations in South Carolina.

The American Petroleum Institute is concerned that those stickers may detract from other warnings such as ones about smoking while pumping gas, which is far more dangerous.

"That whole debate is what is the right language and how do we best warn our customers how do they safely refill?" said Denise McCourt of the American Petroleum Institute.

Some stations do put up a list of warnings, which include static fires, but Fowler said the advice gets lost in a sea of words.

However, consumers need to be warned of another fire danger involving gas pump nozzles, according to Fowler.

A surveillance videotape from a gas station in Oklahoma shows a fire that cost the life of a 32-year-old mother of four. It's not known what caused the fire, but had the woman left the nozzle in the gas tank, engineers say she probably would have lived.

But the nozzle was too hot, Fowler said, so the woman grabbed the hose.

"When she did, it did a snake routine and sprayed gasoline in all directions and she tried to get away but it was too late," he said.

Again, only one gasoline chain in South Carolina plans on using labels on nozzles that warn: In case of fire, do not remove nozzle from the vehicle.

"We have seen the film of that woman that actually died. And we don't want that to happen," said Eric Baumholser of SPINX.

But the American Petroleum Institute says just reading the label could be dangerous.

"We probably don't want to have people have their face that close to that nozzle," said McCourt.