7.2.8: Cabinets

Overview

Remember José Nuñez of Molalla, Oregon, who watched his kitchen cabinets blow open during the 1993 Scotts Mills Earthquake, spewing their contents onto the kitchen floor? Magnetic catches often fail. However, inexpensive babyproof catches will keep cabinet doors closed during an earthquake (Figure 11-11). Heavy, spring-loaded latches are advised, especially for cabinets containing valuable dishes.

If small children live in your house, you might already have babyproof catches, but they’re probably only on cabinets near the floor, within a child’s reach. For earthquake protection, the most important places for babyproof catches are the highest cabinets, particularly those containing heavy, breakable dishes or fragile glassware. Don’t forget the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, where prescription medicine could fall on the floor and mix, producing a toxic combination.

Put layers of foam or paper between heirloom plates that are seldom used but are at great risk during an earthquake. Line your shelves with nonskid shelf padding, available at marine- and recreational-vehicle supply houses, because they are also useful to keep items on the shelf during a heavy sea or when your recreational vehicle is traveling down a bumpy road. In a similar vein, consider a rail or plastic strip around open shelves to keep items from falling off (Figure 11-12). Hold-fast putties are small balls that flatten and stick to the bottom of a large vase to keep it from toppling over; these putties will peel off and
leave no residue. Lead weights in old socks can be placed in the bottom of vases or table lamps to keep them in place.

You won’t be able to take all these precautions. But, considering that a third of your life is spent in bed, lie down on your bed and look around for items that could fall on you during an earthquake. A heavy chest of drawers? A bookcase (Figure 11-10)? A large wall mirror? A ceiling fan? A large headboard? Secure those items that might endanger your life. Then do the same for the beds where other members of your family sleep, particularly small children. (Maybe it’s simpler to move the bed than to secure the furniture!)
Renters might be restricted by the landlord from fastening furniture to the wall. A discussion with the landlord might help, particularly if you are willing to patch the holes in the wall when you move.

Figure 11-11. Safety latches for earthquakes. The simple hook and eye (A) is inexpensive and secure, but you may not remember to close it each time you use the cabinet because it takes an extra step to do so. Some latches (B, C) mount on the surface of the door; others (D) mount inside the door, hold the door firmly shut, and are opened by being pushed gently inward. A child-proof latch (E) prevents the door from being opened more than an inch or two. They close automatically, but are more trouble to open.

Figure 11-12. Securing items on open shelves: (Left) Attach counter-top items to wall with bungee cord. (Center) Secure small items with a vertical strip and larger items with a strip and bungee cord. (Right) Large items, like a TV set, can be attached to wall with chains.