

Fire Safety for the Holidays

Your guests have departed; the dishes are cleared away. Time to turn out the Christmas tree lights and go to bed. But is disaster lurking within your home? The first alert may be when the smoke alarm shrieks its warning at 4:00 a.m. If you don't have a working smoke alarm, you may not wake up at all.

As a home inspector and firefighter with 20 years experience, I am often criticized for being picky about small, insignificant items such as poor wiring, lack of smoke detectors, fire stops and window sizing that really didn't mean very much. Well when fire strikes these items many times make these items make the difference between life and death. I have been to several Christmas Day fires including one where several people died and can tell you they do make the difference.

According to statistics from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the number of fires and fire deaths typically rises sharply during the holiday season. Fires during the holiday season injure 2,000 people every year, and cause over \$500 million in damages. Gatherings of family and friends can mean an increase in cooking activity, which is the leading cause of home fires. Alcohol consumption also tends to increase this time of year and is cited as a contributing factor in many of US fire deaths. Add candles, holiday decorations, fireplaces and heating equipment to the mix and the potential for disaster is great.

You can protect your home and your family from fire with these simple, common sense safety tips:

Cooking: Look while you cook--unattended cooking is the leading cause of kitchen fires. Wear tight-fitting or rolled-up sleeves when cooking and keep all combustible materials a safe distance from the stove. Cooking or smoking while under the influence of alcohol can be deadly. Keep a close eye on any drinkers in your household and make sure all cigarettes are properly extinguished and the stove is off before going to bed.

Candles: Keep candles in a sturdy holder away from children, pets and combustible materials. Snuff them out before leaving the room.

Christmas trees: Nationwide we have had a drought and it's important that you make sure to buy a fresh tree. Needles on fresh trees should be green and hard to pull back from the branches if the tree has been freshly cut. The trunk should be sticky to the touch.

When you get home cut ½" off the base of the tree and put it in a bucket of water for at least a day. When you bring it inside make sure it's not by any heater vents. Always keep the tree stand filled with water. Discard any broken or frayed sets of lights when decorating the tree. Always turn off lights on trees and other decorations when you go to bed or leave your home. A short circuit in any of this equipment could cause a fire.

· When you string the lights on your tree be careful to keep all bulbs turned away from gifts and paper ornaments. Lights in windows can cause curtains and drapes to ignite.

Lit candles should never be placed on or near the Christmas tree. When the tree starts to dry out, it's time to throw it away.

Paper

Dispose of gift-wrappings soon after opening presents. Never put wrapping paper in a fireplace. It can throw off dangerous sparks and produce a chemical buildup in the home that could cause an explosion.

Space heaters: Keep portable heaters at least 2 feet away from anything that can burn—including you. Don't use your heaters to dry shoes or clothes.

Heating appliances: Remember to have your furnace inspected each year by a licensed technician. Your fireplace chimney should also be cleaned and inspected annually to prevent problems that may cause a build-up of carbon monoxide. A carbon monoxide alarm will alert you to the presence of this deadly gas.

Smoke alarms: Over 90% of fire deaths occur in residential dwellings between 11pm-6am when occupants are asleep. Alarms should be installed on every level of your home and outside all sleeping areas. Test your alarms regularly and change the batteries at least once a year. Most fire departments promote this practice during Fire Prevention week in October.

Home Escape Plan: If a fire does occur in your home, everyone must get out as quickly as possible. Develop a fire escape plan and practice it with your entire family. Have a single meeting spot once everyone exits the house.

Don't invite disaster to your holiday celebrations