

Home Heating & Holiday Safety Advice from NFPA

December, January and February are the *leading* months for U.S. home fires and home fire deaths. On average, more than one-third of home fire deaths in the United States occur during the winter months.

Safer Home Heating

NFPA's latest report on U.S. home heating fire patterns indicates that heating equipment fires are the second leading causes of fire deaths in American homes and the biggest fire culprit December through January. An estimated 73,800 home heating fires in 1994 killed 487 people and injured just under 2,000 people. The experts at NFPA say that most U.S. home fires caused by heating equipment could be prevented by taking simple safety precautions.

"The home heating fire problem in America is largely one of human error, particularly with the misuse of portable heaters, fireplaces and woodstoves," says NFPA's assistant vice president for public education, Meri-K Appy. "The critical elements of home heating safety have to do with correct installation, maintenance, fueling and operation of portable and space heaters, as well as safely arranging household items around them." According to NFPA's report, the major causes of U.S. home heating fires are:

- lack of regular cleaning of chimneys in fireplaces and woodstoves;
- placing things that can burn too close to space and portable heaters;
- flaws in design, installation or use;
- fueling errors involving liquid- or gas-fueled heaters; and
- leaving portable or space heaters unattended.

Tips for Preventing Heating Equipment Fires

When purchasing new heating equipment, NFPA advises selecting equipment that bears the mark of an independent testing laboratory. Install and maintain heating equipment correctly, and be sure it complies with local fire and building codes. Where possible, have local building or fire officials check the installation and maintenance.

"In many cases, you can actually prevent a fire just by reading and following the manufacturer's instructions when using a heating device. This is especially important when you are using a new heater for the first time," says Ms. Appy. Here are some specific fire prevention tips from NFPA to keep in mind when heating your home:

- **Portable and Other Space Heaters** - Portable and space heaters can be either electric-powered or fueled by gas, liquid fuel (usually kerosene), or solid fuel (usually wood). All types must be kept at least 36 inches (1 meter) from anything that can burn, including furniture, bedding, clothing, pets and people. Space heaters must not be left operating when you are not in the room or when you go to sleep. Children and pets should be supervised at all times when space heaters are in use. Ensure everyone is aware of the high fire hazard associated with drying clothing or placing combustibles over heaters. If you have an electric space heater, check each season for fraying or splitting wires or overheating. Have all problems repaired by a professional before operating the space heater.
- **Portable Kerosene Heaters** - If you have a liquid-fueled space heater, use only the fuel recommended by the manufacturer. Never use gasoline or any other substitute fuel, because the wrong fuel could burn hotter than the equipment's design limits and cause a serious fire. When refueling, always turn off the heater and let it cool down completely before adding fuel. Wipe up any spills promptly. If you are considering buying a kerosene heater, be sure to check with your local fire department first to find out if it is legal in your community. Store the kerosene away from heat or open flame in a container approved by the local fire department, and be sure it is clearly marked with the fuel name.
- **Fireplaces** - Have your chimney inspected by a professional prior to the start of every heating season and cleaned if necessary. Creosote, a chemical substance that forms when wood burns, builds up in chimneys and can cause a chimney fire if not removed through cleaning. Always protect your home and your family by using a sturdy fireplace screen when burning fires. Remember to burn only wood - never burn paper or pine boughs, which can float out the chimney and ignite your roof or a neighboring home. Do not use flammable liquids in a fireplace. If you are purchasing a factory-built fireplace, select one listed by a testing laboratory, and have it installed according to local codes. If you decorate your fireplace with Christmas stockings or other seasonal decorations, don't burn fires in it.
- **Wood Stoves** - Be sure your wood stove bears the mark of an independent testing laboratory and meets local fire codes. Follow the manufacturer's recommendations for proper installation, use and maintenance. Chimney connections and chimney flues should be inspected at the beginning of each heating season and cleaned when necessary. Follow the same safety rules for wood stoves as you would for space heaters. Burn only wood, and be sure the wood stove is placed on an approved stove board to protect the floor from heat and hot coals. Check with your local fire department and local code officials before having your wood stove installed.

- Portable LP Gas (Propane) Heaters with self-contained fuel supplies (cabinet heaters) are prohibited for home use by NFPA fire safety standards.

Safer Holidays at Home

The winter holidays are a time for celebration, and that means more cooking, lots of entertaining, and an increased risk of fire. In recent years, nearly 600 fires per year have been started by ignition of Christmas trees in the US. (510 in homes), causing an average of 33 deaths (all in homes), 112 injuries, and \$21 million in direct property damage per year. Decorating with candles can also be a fire hazard. An annual average of 6,700 home fires are caused by candles every year, with 87 associated deaths and 587 injuries. Nearly \$59 million in property damage results from candle fires every year. Follow these fire prevention tips from the NFPA to help keep your family safer during the holidays:

- **Holiday Lighting** - Take care when burning candles. Be sure candles are placed in sturdy, non-combustible holders, and are kept well away from decorations and other combustible materials. Check candles frequently to make sure they don't burn down too far or drip hot wax. Don't leave children unattended in a room with lit candles, and always keep candles, as well as matches and lighters, up high, out of the reach of children (preferably stored in a locked cabinet). Don't display lighted candles in windows or near exits in case you need these to escape. Under no circumstances is it safe to use candles to decorate Christmas trees! Keep flashlights and fresh batteries on hand to use for lighting in the event of a power outage.
- **Holiday Entertaining** - Use caution with holiday decorations and whenever possible, choose those made with flame-retardant or non-combustible materials. When cooking for holiday visitors, remember to keep an eye on the range. Unattended cooking is the leading cause of home fires in the U.S., so "stand by your pan!" If there are smokers around your home, provide plenty of large, deep ashtrays and check them frequently. Cigarette butts can smolder and cause a trash fire, so completely douse cigarette butts with water before discarding or flush them down the toilet. After a party, always check inside and under upholstery and cushions and inside trash cans for cigarette butts that may be smoldering. If you have children in your home, keep matches and lighters up high, out of their sight and reach (preferably in a locked cabinet). Ask visitors who are smokers to keep their smoking materials with them when they are visiting in your home.

Christmas Trees - Choose a fresh Christmas tree, and put it in a stand designed not to tip over. Place the tree well away from heat sources and exits, and water it constantly. If you purchase an artificial tree, be sure it is labeled as fire-retardant. When decorating with lights, be sure to purchase only those that bear the mark of a testing laboratory. Replace any frayed or damaged cords. For outside decorations, use only those lights labeled for outdoor use. Bring outdoor lights inside following the holidays so they are not damaged by extended exposure to harsh weather conditions. Always unplug all lights before leaving home or going to sleep and don't overload electrical outlets. Use only battery-operated lights if you have a metal Christmas tree, or decorate without lighting.

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