

Holiday Safety



When the holiday seasons approach, we look forward to spending time celebrating with friends and loved ones. Our homes will be festively decorated with the anticipation of the joyous times ahead. The holiday decorations used can be exciting and beautiful but also dangerous if improperly used, especially for children. Every year thousands of needless injuries and deaths are caused by decorations and carelessness. A little caution and planning during the seasons can help you avoid needless tragedy.

Holiday decorating & lighting

The winter holidays are a time for celebration, and that means more cooking, home decorating, entertaining, and an increased risk of fire due to heating equipment.

General Safety Tips:

- Purchase only lights and electrical decorations bearing the name of an independent testing lab, and follow the manufacturer's instructions for installation and maintenance.
- Use caution with holiday decorations and whenever possible, choose those made with flame-resistant, flame-retardant or non-combustible materials.
- Keep candles away from decorations and other combustible materials, and do not use candles to decorate Christmas trees.
- Carefully inspect new and previously used light strings and replace damaged items before plugging lights in. Do not overload extension cords.
- Always unplug lights before replacing light bulbs or fuses.
- Don't mount lights in any way that can damage the cord's wire insulation (i.e., using clips, not nails).
- Keep children and pets away from light strings and electrical decorations.
- Turn off all light strings and decorations before leaving the house or going to bed.

Holiday Entertaining:

- Provide plenty of large, deep ashtrays and check them frequently. Cigarette butts can smolder in the trash and cause a fire, so completely douse cigarette butts with water before discarding, or flush them down the toilet.
- Unattended cooking is the leading cause of home fires in the U.S. When cooking for holiday visitors, remember to keep an eye on the range.
- After a party, always check on, between and under upholstery and cushions and inside trashcans for cigarette butts that may be smoldering.
- Keep matches and lighters up high, out of sight and reach of children (preferably in a locked cabinet). When smokers visit your home, ask them to keep their smoking materials with them so young children do not touch them.
- Test your smoke alarms, and let guests know what your fire escape plan is.

Decorating Christmas trees:

Carefully decorating Christmas trees can help make your holidays safer.

- Never use electric lights on a metal tree.
- When decorating Christmas trees, always use safe tree lights. (Some lights are designed only for indoor or outdoor use, but not both.) Larger tree lights should also have some type of reflector rather than a bare bulb and a testing laboratory should list all lights.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions on how to use tree lights. Any string of lights with worn, frayed or broken cords or loose bulb connections should not be used.
- Always unplug Christmas tree lights before leaving home or going to sleep.
- Never use lit candles to decorate a tree, and place them well away from tree branches.
- Try to keep live trees as moist as possible by giving them plenty of water daily. Do not purchase a tree that is dry or dropping needles.
- Choose a sturdy tree stand designed not to tip over.
- When purchasing an artificial tree, be sure it is labeled as fire-retardant.
- Children are fascinated with Christmas trees. Keep a watchful eye on them when around the tree and do not let them play with the wiring or lights.
- Store matches and lighters up high, out of the reach of children, preferably in a locked cabinet.
- Make sure the tree is at least three feet (one meter) away from any heat source and try to position it near an outlet so that cords are not running long distances. Do not place the tree where it may block exits.

- Safely dispose of the tree when it begins dropping needles. Dried-out trees are highly flammable and should not be left in a house or garage, or placed against the house.

Christmas Tree Fires Facts & Figures:

- Christmas trees were the items first ignited in an estimated 360 reported U.S. structure fires per year resulting in 15 civilian deaths, 44 civilian injuries, and \$16.4 million in direct property damage per year, in 1999-2002. These include real as well as artificial trees.
- The leading factor contributing to Christmas tree fires and property damage was a heat source too close to combustibles, with 18 percent of the fires. Forty-four percent of Christmas tree fires in homes involved no equipment, but when equipment was cited it was usually electrical system components, as one would expect if decorative light on the trees, or the system feeding them power, were the primary problem.
- The leading source of heat was arcing, accounting for 90 reported fires per year (30%), no civilian deaths, 10 civilian injuries, and \$3.8 million in direct property damage per year. Radiated or conducted heat from properly operating equipment, the second leading cause accounted for 19 percent of the total.

Candle Safety

Remember that a candle is an open flame. It can easily ignite any combustible nearby.

- Extinguish all candles when leaving the room or going to sleep.
- Keep candles away from items that can catch fire (e.g. clothing, books, paper, curtains, Christmas trees, flammable decorations).
- Use candle holders that are sturdy, won't tip over easily, are made from a material that can't burn and are large enough to collect dripping wax.
- Don't place lit candles in windows, where blinds and curtains can close over them.
- Place candle holders on a sturdy, uncluttered surface and do not use candles in places where they could be knocked over by children or pets.
- Keep candles and all open flames away from flammable liquids.
- Keep candle wicks trimmed to one-quarter inch and extinguish taper and pillar candles when they get to within two inches of the holder or decorative material. Votives and containers should be extinguished before the last half-inch of wax starts to melt.

Candles & Children:

- Keep candles up high out of reach of children.
- Never leave a child unattended in a room with a candle. A child should not sleep in a room with a lit candle.
- Don't allow children or teens to have candles in their bedrooms.
- Store candles, matches and lighters up high and out children's sight and reach, preferably in a locked cabinet.

During power outages:

- Try to avoid carrying a lit candle. Don't use a lit candle when searching for items in a confined space.
- Never use a candle for a light when checking pilot lights or fueling equipment such as a kerosene heater or lantern. The flame may ignite the fumes.

Facts & Figures:

- During 2002, an estimated 18,000 home fires started by candles were reported to public fire departments. These fires resulted in an estimated 130 civilian deaths, 1,350 civilian injuries and an estimated direct property loss of \$333 million. Homes include one- and two-family dwellings, apartments and manufactured housing.
- The estimated number of home candle fires was unchanged from 2001 to 2002. For the first time since 1991, the number of home candle fires has stabilized rather than increasing.
- Candle fires accounted for an estimated 5% of all reported home fires.
- Two-fifths (40%) of the home candle fires started in the bedroom, resulting in 30% of the associated civilian deaths.
- Reported home candle fires have more than tripled since the low of 5,500 in 1990.
- December had almost twice the number of home candle fires of an average month.
- Half (50%) of home candle fires occurred when some form of combustible material was left or came too close to the candle; Eighteen percent occurred after candles were left unattended, abandoned or inadequately controlled; Five percent were started by people (usually children) playing with the candle.
- Falling asleep was a factor in 12% of home candle fires and 25% of the home candle fire deaths.
- Christmas Day was the peak day of the year for home candle fires in 1999-2002. New Year's Day and Christmas Eve tied for second.

Source: NFPA's One-Stop Data Shop Source: National estimates based on NFIRS and NFPA survey (preliminary data)