

Keeping Minnesota *Ready*



WEDNESDAY - WINTER HOME AND FIRE SAFETY

In the winter months, our heating, lighting, cooking, and holiday activities increase dramatically — and with them, the risk of residential fires. The information below provides facts and tips about the threat of home fires and how to avoid them.

HEATING

Death and injury can be reduced with proper understanding and safe use of heating equipment. Safety should be your first consideration when heating your home. Remember these safety guidelines and tips:

PORTABLE AND SPACE HEATERS

- Portable heaters come in many shapes and sizes and use a variety of fuels or power sources. When purchasing or using a space or portable heater, make sure it carries a UL or FM label and is approved for the use you intended.
- Place any portable heating device at least three feet away from anything combustible, including paper, drapery, bedding and clothing.
- Space heaters need constant watching and should always be turned off when you leave your home and before bedtime.
- Drying mittens or other combustibles over a space or portable heater is a fire danger.
- Make sure all cords on electric heaters are in good shape and checked periodically for any frays or breaks in the insulation surrounding the wires.
- Check the cord and outlet occasionally for overheating; if it feels hot, turn it off.

Liquid-fueled and gas-burning heaters

- Any heating appliance with an open flame needs to be vented to the outside to eliminate the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning.
- When using these types of heating devices, manufacturers' instructions and recommendations should be followed faithfully.
- Units must be cooled before refueling; this should take place outside of the structure. Fuel must be stored in a container approved by the fire department and clearly marked with the fuel name.

WOOD STOVES

- Follow manufacturers' recommendations for proper installation, use and maintenance.
- Make sure the stove is properly ventilated. Other household venting appliances can diminish proper venting of your wood stove. Test all other appliances (bathroom fans, stovetop venting, HVAC units, etc.) to ensure that they don't interfere with proper stove venting.
- Maintain clearances around stoves, flue pipes, and floors according to manufacturers' recommendations.
- Check all connections at the beginning of the heating season.
- If you have questions about fire protection devices, contact your local fire department.

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FIREPLACES AND WOOD BURNING STOVES

Preventive:

- Chimneys need to be inspected by a professional sweep prior to the start of each heating season and periodically throughout the year
- Have chimneys cleaned if there is a buildup of creosote. Creosote is a chemical substance that forms when wood burns and builds up on the chimney wall. It is highly combustible.

Active:

- Fireplace screens should be firmly in place when you burn fires.
- Burn only clean, well-seasoned, dry firewood in the fireplace.
- Make sure home smoke detectors are installed and working.

COOKING

Winter is a time for family gatherings and festive meals. Guests tend to gather in the kitchen, but it can be the most hazardous room in the house if you don't practice safe cooking behavior. Careless use of cooking equipment, usually a range or stovetop, is the leading cause of home fires and home-fire injuries in the United States. Keep your meals happy and safe by following a few simple rules:

In the kitchen

- Stay close to the kitchen while you are frying, grilling, or broiling food. If you leave the kitchen for even a short period of time, have someone else monitor the stove or turn it off.
- If you are slow cooking - simmering, baking, roasting, check it regularly, and be sure someone is home while food is cooking. Use a timer to remind you that you are cooking.
- Keep anything that can catch fire — oven mitts, wooden utensils, food packaging, towels or curtains — away from your stovetop.
- Have a “**kid-free zone**” of at least 3 feet around the stove and areas where food is cooking or being prepared.
- Keep all decorations and any flammable materials away from the cooking areas

If you should have a fire

- Never throw water on a grease fire!
- If you can - smother the flames by covering the pan with a lid. Do not remove the lid until the pan is completely cooled.
- Turn off the heat immediately.
- Use baking soda (flour can be explosive) on shallow grease fires.
- Never turn on the overhead fan, as this could spread the fire

Other Safety Tips

- Get a home fire extinguisher and keep it near the kitchen
- Be sure your home and kitchen have clear walk ways to exit quickly if necessary
- Keep nearby fire hydrants clear of snow or debris
- Don't block streets or walkways with excess cars or decorations – allow emergency vehicle access

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HOLIDAY FIRE SAFETY

Holiday decorating goes a long way to help brighten up our wintery days and long nights. Unfortunately, decorations become a significant hazard if not used carefully. An estimated 250 home fires involving Christmas trees and another 170 involving holiday lights and other decorative lighting occur each year across the U.S. By following a few simple safety tips on electric lights, candles and Christmas trees, you can avoid creating a tragedy. Learn how to prevent a fire or what to do in case of a fire in your home.

Holiday decorating

- Be careful with holiday decorations. Choose decorations that are flame resistant or flame retardant.
- Keep lit candles away from decorations and other things that can burn. Use flameless candles when possible.
- Some lights are only for indoor or outdoor use, but not both.
- Replace any string of lights with worn or broken cords or loose bulb connections. Read manufacturer's instructions for number of light strands to connect.
- Use clips, not nails, to hang lights so the cords do not get damaged.
- Keep decorations away from windows and doors.
- Never leave children alone in a room with lit candles or matches/lighters.

Holiday Entertaining

- Test your smoke alarms and have a home fire escape plan. Make sure guests know how to get out if necessary.
- Keep children and pets away from lit candles.
- Keep matches and lighters in a locked cabinet.
- Stay in the kitchen when cooking on the stovetop.
- Ask smokers to smoke outside. Remind smokers to keep their smoking materials with them so young children do not touch them.
- Provide large, deep ashtrays for smokers. Wet cigarette butts with water before discarding.
- **Blow out lit candles when you leave the room or go to bed.**
- Turn off all light strings and decorations before leaving home or going to bed.

CHRISTMAS TREE SAFETY TIPS

Each year, fire departments respond to an average of 210 structure fires caused by Christmas trees. Carefully decorating Christmas trees can help make your holidays safer.

Picking the tree

- If you have an artificial tree, be sure it is labeled, certified, or identified by the manufacturer as fire retardant.
- Choose a tree with fresh, green needles that do not fall off when touched.

Placing the tree

- Before placing the tree in the stand, cut 1" - 2" from the base of the trunk.
- Make sure the tree is at least three feet away from any heat source, like fireplaces, radiators, candles, heat vents or lights.
- Make sure the tree is not blocking an exit.
- Add water to the tree stand. Be sure to add water daily.

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Lighting the tree

- Use lights that have the label of an independent testing laboratory. Some lights are only for indoor or outdoor use, but not both.
- Replace any string of lights with worn or broken cords or loose bulb connections. Connect no more than three strands of mini string sets and a maximum of 50 bulbs for screw-in bulbs. Read manufacturer's instructions for number of LED strands to connect.
- Never use lit candles to decorate the tree.
- Always turn off Christmas tree lights before leaving home or going to bed.

After Christmas

Get rid of the tree when it begins dropping needles. Dried-out trees are a fire danger and should not be left in the home or garage, or placed outside against the home. Check with your local community to find a recycling program. Bring outdoor electrical lights inside after the holidays to prevent hazards and make them last longer.

HOW TO CLOSE UP YOUR HOME IN COLD WEATHER

There are several steps to take to protect your home if you have to close it up in cold weather. While homes with private wells and septic systems may require more protective action than homes with city water and sewer, there are things that all homeowners can do to protect unheated homes.

BE SURE TO ADDRESS RISKS OF LEAVING YOUR HOME UNHEATED

The most common, and extensive, damage to unheated homes is caused by frozen water pipes. There is no way to be certain pipes won't freeze, but in general, when your home is without heat for more than a day, you should:

- Turn off the water supply where it comes into the home from the street or well. The turnoff is usually in the basement or utility room. Consult your water company if you are not sure where the valve is located. Well-water pumps should be turned off.
- Open all the faucets, including shower and tub faucets, to drain all the water out of the pipes. The water will drain slowly out of the lowest-level faucets in the basement near a laundry, or into the bathtub in a house with no basement. If possible, use an air compressor or cans of compressed air to force the water out of pipes.
- Remove the hoses from your washing machine and open these faucets, too.
- Flush toilets at least twice to drain water out of them. Remove as much water as possible from the toilet bowl and the water tank.
- Pour recreational vehicle (RV) anti-freeze into all areas that have water left in them including toilet bowls, toilet water tanks, all the sink drains, floor drains, laundry-box drains, etc.
- Call a professional (your gas company) to turn off the gas valve to your hot water tank.

TURNING THE WATER BACK ON

- Go through the house and turn all faucets, showers and tubs to OFF.
- Reconnect the washing machine hoses to the correct faucets.
- Turn the water back ON to the house at the main water valve from the street or well.
- Water will immediately begin flowing to refill the toilets.

Beware: If there are damaged pipes, this is when they'll begin to leak. Listen carefully for flowing-water sounds after toilet tanks are refilled. The water-flow sounds should stop after about 60 seconds and be silent while the faucets are still turned off. If the water flow sound persists after 60 seconds, turn the main water valve back to OFF and look through your house for visual signs of water leaks and damage. If water damage has occurred, leave the main valve off and phone for professional help to locate and repair frozen water pipes.

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WINTER SAFETY CHECKLIST — AFTER A WINTER STORM

IF POWER GOES OUT:

- If someone in the home is on life-support or otherwise electricity-dependent due to a disability, immediately notify your city or county Emergency Management Department and your utility.
- If the outage is only in your home or neighborhood, notify your utility as soon as possible and determine anticipated repair time.
- Turn off or unplug lights and appliances to prevent a circuit overload (spike) when the power returns. Leave one light on to let you know when power has been restored.
- Avoid and report downed power lines or areas where ice, trees or objects are laying on the lines.

HEAT:

- Use safe alternative heat sources such as a fireplace, a small, well-vented wood or coal stove, or a propane space heater. Follow manufacturers' instructions and never substitute one type of fuel for another.
- To prevent carbon monoxide poisoning by alternative heat sources:
 - Ensure adequate ventilation.
 - Do not operate generators indoors or near ventilations.
 - Do not use charcoal or gas grills to cook indoors.
 - Do not use your gas oven or dryer to heat your home.
- Keep your refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to avoid food spoilage.
- Dress in layers of lightweight clothing and wear a cap.
- Eat well-balanced meals to keep your body warm. Stay well hydrated.
- Close off rooms you do not need.

CLEARING YOUR ROOF OF SNOW AND ICE:

- Clearing your roof is a dangerous task. Think about safety first. If possible, do not attempt to clear the roof alone.
- When possible, use long-handled rakes or poles designed for roof snow removal.
- If you must use a ladder, make sure the base is securely anchored. Ask someone to hold the ladder while you climb.
- Plan ahead so you know where the snow you clear will fall — and what it will land on.
- Do not touch electrical wires.
- If the job is too big for you, ask neighbors for help or hire a service.