

Brookings Fire Department

Prepping for Winter

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Careless use of fireplaces, inappropriate use of electric space heaters and kerosene heaters plus the addition of decorative lights and candles for holiday events can all contribute to fires.

The Holiday season is typically regarded as extending from late November to early January and includes Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa and New Year's Day. These months pose a higher fire threat due to an increased use of heating sources, such as chimneys and wood stoves, and electrical products, such as holiday lights.

Using the latest three years of data, the U.S. Fire Administration estimates fire loss for December 24, 25 and 26 at more than \$80 million. Each year, these three-day losses result from an estimated 12,000 fires that require fire department response and the fires cause an average of approximately 250 injuries and 40 fatalities.

The major causes of U.S. home heating fires are from heaters, wood stoves and fireplaces.

These include:

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

Decorating with candles can also be a fire hazard. Candles cause an annual average of 6,700 home fires every year, with 87 associated deaths and 587 injuries. Nearly \$59 million in property damage results from candle fires every year.

Fire kills more Americans than all natural disasters combined. Every year (nationally) approximately 4,000 people die in fires, 25,000 are injured, and direct property loss is estimated at more than \$8 billion. More than 80 percent of fire deaths occur in the home, most often claiming the lives of the young, the elderly and the economically challenged.

Special reminders for the holiday season

- ∨ Indoor holiday trees should be fresh and kept away from heat sources. Tree stands should be filled with water at all times. Don't smoke near trees and remove them within two weeks.
- ∨ Holiday lights should be checked for frayed wires, bare spots, gaps in insulation, broken or cracked sockets and excessive kinking or wear before use. Periodically check the wires to be sure they are not warm to the touch.
- ∨ Candles should be used only on stable surfaces and kept away from combustible materials. Never leave candles burning unattended.

Basic steps to help prevent home fires in the winter:

- ∨ Never use a kitchen oven or range to heat your home.
- ∨ Keep space heaters and wood stoves at least three feet from combustibles.
- ∨ Do not refill kerosene heaters during operation or while still hot.
- ∨ Make sure wood stoves have proper floor support and adequate ventilation.
- ∨ Fireplaces should have a glass or metal screen to prevent sparks from igniting nearby combustible materials.
- ∨ Chimneys should be cleaned and inspected annually.
- ∨ Have qualified specialists do furnace repairs; check emergency shutoffs and clearances required for safe operation.
- ∨ Don't stockpile liquid fuels such as gasoline, kerosene, or lantern fluid.
- ∨ Smoke alarms should be installed and operational on every level of your home. Smoke alarms more than 10 years old should be replaced.
- ∨ Stock up on flashlights and extra batteries in case of power outages and don't use candles for emergency lighting.

- ∇ Never leave cooking unattended and double-check all appliances are turned off before going to bed or leaving your home.
- ∇ Turn panhandles inward to avoid spills and keep combustibles away from flames and hot surfaces.
- ∇ If a kitchen fire breaks out, put a lid on the pan or use baking soda to extinguish the flames.
- ∇ Never use water on a grease fire.

Kerosene Heaters

- ∇ Be sure your heater is in good working condition. Inspect exhaust parts for carbon build-up. Be sure the heater has an emergency shut off in case the heater is tipped over.
- ∇ Never use fuel-burning appliances without proper room venting.
- ∇ Burning fuel (kerosene, coal or propane, for example) produces deadly fumes. Use only the fuel recommended by the heater manufacturer.
- ∇ Never introduce a fuel into a unit not designed for that type fuel.
- ∇ Keep kerosene, or other flammable liquids stored in approved metal containers, in well-ventilated storage areas, outside of the house.
- ∇ Never fill the heater while it is operating or hot.
- ∇ When refueling an oil or kerosene unit, avoid overfilling.
- ∇ Use caution with cold fuel for it may expand in the tank as it warms up. Refueling should be done outside of the home (or outdoors).
- ∇ Keep young children safely away from space heaters -- especially when they are wearing nightgowns or other loose clothing that can be easily ignited.
- ∇ When using a fuel-burning appliance in the bedroom, be sure there is proper ventilation to prevent a buildup of carbon monoxide.
- ∇ Keep space heaters and wood stoves at least three feet from combustibles.

Wood stoves and fireplaces

- ∨ Be sure the stove or fireplace is installed properly.
- ∨ Wood stoves should have adequate clearance (36") from combustible surfaces, and proper floor support and protection.
- ∨ Wood stoves should be of good quality, solid construction and design, and should be Underwriter Laboratories (UL) listed.
- ∨ Have the chimney inspected annually and cleaned if necessary, especially if it has not been used for some time.
- ∨ Do not use flammable liquids to start or accelerate any fire.
- ∨ Keep a glass or metal screen in front of the fireplace opening, to prevent embers or sparks from jumping out, unwanted material from going in, and help prevent the possibility of burns to occupants.
- ∨ The stove should be burned hot twice a day for 15-30 minutes to reduce the amount of creosote buildup.
- ∨ Don't use excessive amounts of paper to build roaring fires in fireplaces. It is possible to ignite creosote in the chimney by overbuilding the fire.
- ∨ Never burn charcoal indoors. Burning charcoal can give off lethal amounts of carbon monoxide.
- ∨ Keep flammable materials away from your mantel. A spark from the fireplace could easily ignite these materials.
- ∨ Before you go to sleep, be sure your fireplace fire is out. NEVER close your damper with hot ashes in the fireplace. A closed damper will help the fire to heat up again and will force toxic carbon monoxide into the house.
- ∨ If synthetic logs are used, follow the directions on the package. Never break a synthetic log apart to quicken the fire or use more than one log at a time. They often burn unevenly, releasing higher levels of carbon monoxide.

Furnace Heating

- ∨ It's important that you have your furnace inspected to insure that it is in good working condition.
- ∨ Be sure all furnace controls and emergency shutoffs are in proper working condition.
- ∨ Leave furnace repairs to qualified specialists. Do not attempt repairs yourself unless you are qualified.

- ∇ Inspect the walls and ceiling near the furnace and along the chimney line. If the wall is hot or discolored, additional pipe insulation or clearance may be required.
- ∇ Check the flue pipes and pipe seams. Are they well supported? Free of holes and cracks? Soot along or around seams may be an indicator of a leak.
- ∇ Is the chimney solid? No cracks or loose bricks? All unused flue openings should be sealed with solid masonry.
- ∇ Keep trash and other combustibles away from the heating system.

Other Fire Safety Tips

- ∇ Never discard hot ashes inside or near the home. Place them in a metal container outside and well away from the house.
- ∇ Never use a range or an oven as a supplementary heating device. Not only is it a safety hazard, it can be a source of potentially toxic fumes.
- ∇ If you use an electric heater, be sure not to overload the circuit. Only use extension cords, which have the necessary rating to carry the amp load.
- ∇ Avoid using electric space heaters in bathrooms, or other areas where they may come in contact with water.
- ∇ Frozen water pipes? Never try to thaw them with a blowtorch or other open flame, (otherwise the pipe could conduct the heat and ignite the wall structure inside the wall space). Use hot water or a UL labeled device such as a hand held dryer for thawing.
- ∇ If windows are used as emergency exits in your home, practice using them in the event fire should strike. Be sure that all windows open easily. Home escape ladders are recommended.
- ∇ If there is a fire hydrant near your home you can assist the fire department by keeping the hydrant clear of snow so in the event it is needed, it can be located.

Finally

- ∇ Be sure every level of your home has working smoke detectors and be sure to check and clean it on a monthly basis and replace your batteries at least twice a year.
- ∇ Contact the Brookings Fire Department for advice if you have further questions on home fire safety. 📞