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CITY OF MUSCATINE PRESS RELEASE

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COMMON SENSE KEY TO PREVENTING HOUSE FIRES THIS WINTER

Home fires, carbon monoxide poisoning increase during winter months

MUSCATINE, Iowa – A little common sense can go a long way to keeping you safe throughout the year. That is especially true during the winter months when houses are closed up and cold temperatures arrive according to Assistant Fire Chief Mike Hartman.

With old man winter already making himself known to the Muscatine area just before Halloween and furnaces across the community getting their first workouts of the winter season, Hartman recommends families complete a safety check of their homes before the harshness of winter sets in.

Inspecting the furnace, water heater, any other gas or coal-burning appliances, fireplaces, and wood stoves along with checking the smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in a home are common sense steps toward fire prevention and home safety this winter.

Fireplaces and wood stoves should be cleaned and inspected each year before use and homeowners should use caution when disposing of the ashes from previous fireplace fires.



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"It is a good idea to make sure that your smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors are in good working order," Hartman said. "Check the batteries and change if needed. Also check the date on the detectors. Sensors, over time, are not as functional. If they are 10 years old, they need to be replaced. Also, if there is no date on the detector, it is probably a good idea to replace them."

Hartman noted that several fire calls recently have been to homes that have either removed the smoke detector or removed the battery from them.

CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING

Fire and carbon monoxide poisoning are two of the major issues related to winter home heating along with the use of space heaters.

Carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless gas that can fill a home without the occupant realizing it and usually striking the victim while they are sleeping. More than 400 people in the United States die from unintentional carbon monoxide poisoning every year according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than 20,000 visit the emergency room, and more than 4,000 others are hospitalized.

Winter is a time when residents seal up their homes as much as possible to keep the cold from getting in and the heat from getting out. When a homeowner does that, however, there is the greater likelihood of a carbon monoxide buildup. If you had a cracked heat exchanger on your furnace, for example, and it went undetected you could be filling up the home with carbon monoxide and not even know it.

That is one of the reasons that a carbon monoxide detector is required in every home and it is suggested that one be placed outside of every bedroom in the home. And if the detector activates, just don't believe that it is a bad battery.



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"It is better to investigate," Hartman said.

Hartman said that if a person calls 911 and reports that a carbon monoxide detector is making noise, the dispatcher will ask if anyone has a headache (that occurs at home but not when at work or school), signs of flu, or anything like that might be related to carbon monoxide poisoning.

"If they do, we will respond," Hartman said. "If they don't, we send the gas company who are better equipped to detect where the leaks are coming from and what needs to be done to solve the problem."

SPACE HEATERS

While the number of fire calls that are the result of a space heater failure have not been great, the potential does exist if common sense is not followed.

"I do not know how many use space heaters anymore, but there are concerns about their use," Hartman said.

Chief among them is that electric space heaters need to be plugged directly into a wall outlet and without the use of an extension cord.

"We have had a lot of electrical fires from the overuse of extension cords," Hartman said. "If you have to use one, make sure that it is a heavy enough one that will not overheat when used. In the grand scheme of things we have not had a lot of space heater issues, or a lot of fireplace issues in the last few years also."

And never use a portable flameless chemical heater indoors or a gas oven to heat your home.



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KITCHEN FIRES

Hartman added that kitchen fires, although not weather related, have been the reasons for many of the calls the department has responded to lately.

"These usually happen when someone forgets that they have a pan on the stove and sits down to watch television or falls asleep," Hartman said. "Again it is just common sense that if you have something on the stove, pay attention to it."

The fire department recently responded to a kitchen fire where a resident left a pan of grease unattended and it caught fire. The residents' fire extinguisher did not work so they tried to spray the grease fire with water to put it out. Unfortunately, that just spread the fire and the individual had to be transported to the burn center at the University of Iowa Hospital for treatment.

"Water may eventually put out a grease fire if you use enough of it but it will definitely spread the fire first," Hartman said. "The best option in putting out a grease fire is to use a lid to cover the pan and smother the fire."

SNOW AND ICE BUILD UP

Heavy snow and ice could block the roof vents for a resident's furnace and water heater which could force carbon monoxide back into house.

The Fire Department also asks that residents shovel out a three feet circle around fire hydrant so that fire crews have room to operate.

TURKEY FRYERS ARE MEANT TO BE OUTSIDE



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Hartman vividly remembers an incident many years ago where a home was lost because the residents used a turkey fryer inside.

“Sadly it is a fairly common story this time of year,” Hartman said. “If not used properly you could lose your home or you could suffer severe burns from improper usage.”

Turkey fryers are meant to be used outside and not in a house or inside a garage.

CANDLES CAN ALSO CAUSE FIRES

Candles are another item that residents have to remember about and not place near anything flammable, near window coverings, near paper towels, or near areas when kitchen towels are hanging. If you leave the room try to remember to put the candles out especially if you are going out or going to bed.

OTHER TIPS

Never use a generator inside a home, basement, or garage, or less than 20 feet from any window, door or vent. Even if windows and doors are open fatal levels of carbon monoxide can fill a home.

Never run a car in a garage that is attached to a house, even with the garage door open as carbon monoxide could still penetrate into the home. When running a car in a detached garage, always open the door to let fresh air in.

National Fire Prevention Association: [Put A Freeze On Winter Fires](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Winter Weather](#)

National Safety Council: [Winter Safety Tips](#) and [Fire Safety Tips](#).