



PRESS RELEASE

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USE COMMON SENSE TO PREVENT FIRES, PERSONAL INJURY

Home fires, carbon monoxide poisoning increase during the winter months

MUSCATINE, Iowa – A little common sense goes a long way to keeping your home, your family, and you safe throughout the year. This is especially true during the winter months when houses are closed up and cold temperatures arrive.

Muscatine Fire Chief Jerry Ewers would like to share some public safety tips to keep you safe during the holiday season. Hopefully, these tips will enable you to stay safe and not have to call 9-1-1 during the holidays.

With colder weather and the holiday season upon us, families should complete a safety check of their homes including inspecting the furnace, water heater, any other gas or coal-burning appliances, fireplaces, and wood stoves. Another common-sense step toward home safety this winter is to check your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors to make sure they are working.

“It is a good idea to make sure that your smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors are in good working order,” Assistant Fire Chief Mike 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



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probably is a good idea to replace them.”

Advance planning (i.e., develop an escape plan) and smoke alarms enhance your ability to escape your home during a fire.

“Have an escape plan in place and practice that escape plan with your family,” Pat Gingerich, Blue Shift Captain, said. “Knowing what to do in a fire event is critical and seconds count.”

The NFPA offers some tips on developing a [Home Fire Escape Plan](#).

DECORATING AND CANDLES

Carefully decorating your home can help make your holidays safer according to the National Fire Prevention Association. U.S. fire departments responded to an estimated average of 790 home structure fires per year that began with decorations, excluding Christmas trees. These fires caused an annual average of four civilian fire deaths, 33 civilian fire injuries, and \$14 million in direct property damage.

Electrical distribution or lighting equipment was involved in more than two in five home Christmas tree fires. December and January are the highest months for home fires started by candles. On average, 33 percent of home decoration fires were started by candles during a calendar year but that jumped to 46 percent in December.

“Be sure to blow out each candle and turn off all light strings before heading out or heading to bed,” Hartman said. “And make sure decorations are not too close to a heating source.”

CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING

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



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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 die from unintentional carbon monoxide poisoning every year in the United States 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.

"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.



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"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.

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."

In one example, a resident left a pan of grease unattended on the stove 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 suffered burns as a result.

"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."



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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 the house.

The Fire Department also asks that after a heavy snow event residents shovel out a three feet circle around the fire hydrant so that fire crews have room to operate should they be needed.

TURKEY FRYERS ARE MEANT TO BE OUTSIDE

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.

GENERATORS

[Portable generators](#) are useful during power outages, however, many homeowners are unaware that the improper use of portable generators can be risky according to the National Fire Prevention Association.

The most common dangers associated with portable generators are carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning, electrical shock or electrocution, and fire hazards. According to a 2013 [Consumer Product Safety Commission report](#), half of the generator-related deaths happened in the four coldest months of the year, November through February, and portable generators were involved in the majority of carbon monoxide deaths involving engine-driven tools.



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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.

CAR IN A GARAGE

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.

OTHER RESOURCES

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](#).