

State Fire Marshal Warns of Cooking, Heating Fires During Holidays

Cooking and heating related incidents are the leading cause of residential structure fires in South Carolina, said John Reich, Fire and Life Safety Deputy Director/State Fire Marshal. These fires account for almost 40 percent of the state's total reported structure fires.

"With the holidays approaching, warm, cozy homes and holiday feasts play a major role in our preparations for family gatherings," he said. "It also increases the risks for fire. These fires can be prevented and losses reduced by simply following important safety measures."

Reich recommends these kitchen safety tips:

- Pay close attention while cooking, especially when using oils and grease.
- Keep cooking appliances clean of grease build-up, which can easily ignite.
- Trying to carry a pan that's on fire is dangerous. It may ignite clothes or spill, causing severe burns.
- Apply a lid to a small grease fire. It is usually the most effective and safest method of controlling it.
- If the fire is inside your oven, turn off the heat. Leave the door closed to cut off the fire's air supply.
- Keep children away from cooking appliances.
- Use back burners, when possible.
- Keep pot handles turned to the inside so they won't be pulled or knocked over.
- Check stoves and other appliances before going to bed or leaving your home. Make sure that the units are left in the "off" position.
- Now is a great time to make sure your smoke alarms are in working order and to review your home escape plan so that if in the event of a fire, everyone in your household knows how to get out quickly and safely. For added protection, consider installing a residential fire sprinkler system.

With the increased popularity of frying turkey, the National Fire Protection Agency and the National Burn Foundation warn consumers and discourage the use of turkey fryers. Tests have shown that many of the fryers have a risk of tipping over, overheating, or spilling hot oil, leading to fires and burns. The suggested alternative is to have a commercial professional prepare the turkey.

"As we experience the colder months of the year, typically November through February, heating related safety is of utmost concern," Reich said. "The majority of fire deaths occur during these four months and they are often related to inadequate heating systems or the improper use of heating systems."

Reich recommends checking home smoke alarms.

"They should be a priority at any time of year," he said.

Smoke alarms should be placed between the kitchen and living area. They should be in working order to provide early warning of a fire.

"With the use of modern technology, many communities in the United States are taking safety a step further by installing residential sprinkler systems," Reich said. "These systems quickly control the fire, causing little or no damage and preventing the loss of life and property."

Following these general safety guidelines can help keep your home and family safe:

ELECTRIC HEATERS

Electric heaters should have automatic safety switches to turn them off if tipped over. They also should carry the UL-approval label. Check the cords before plugging in the heater. If frayed, worn or broken, do not use. Either replace the heater or have an electrician replace the cord. Wrapping tape on the cord is not enough to prevent overheating and fire.

Never use extension cords with portable heaters. To supply a heater with a small, ordinary household extension cord will cause the cord to overheat and burn. Keep all materials that can burn at least 36 inches away from unit.

KEROSENE HEATERS

Many kerosene heater related fires are attributed to the misuse or abuse of the devices itself. Purchase a heater that carries the UL label. This means it has been tested for safety. Be sure it has an automatic safety switch to shut it off if it's tipped over. An automatic starter eliminates the need for matches and makes for safer starts. A fuel gauge will help ensure you do not overfill the heater dangerously. A safety grill on the front can prevent accidental contact burns. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for assembly.

Use only crystal-clear 1K kerosene, never a yellow or contaminated kerosene or any other fuel. Fill it only outside. Store kerosene outside in a metal container with a tight-fitting lid that is clearly marked for kerosene. When using kerosene heaters, be sure the room is well ventilated. Opening a door to an adjoining room or area may be enough. Better yet, slightly open a window in the room.

WOOD HEATERS

Wood stoves and other wood-burning devices are popular heating systems. Before investing in one for your home, think as much about safety as you will about ease of use, efficiency and appearance. Have your stove installed by a professional. Keep a tight-fitting screen or glass doors in front of the stove or fireplace at all times. Special retaining screens can keep children and pets away from wood stoves and prevent burns. Dispose of ashes in metal containers, never in paper bags, cardboard boxes, or plastic wastebaskets. Wet ashes down to

cool them thoroughly. Remember, ashes can retain enough heat to cause a fire for several days, so take no chances.

Although these tips should help prevent a fire, know the signs of danger. A loud roar, sucking sounds and shaking pipes mean trouble and danger. If you hear these sounds, get everyone out of the house. Quickly shut off the fire's air supply by closing any air intake vents in the firebox. Close the damper. Call the fire department from a nearby phone.

IN GENERAL

Keep any heater at least three feet away from anything that might burn such as curtains, walls, furniture and papers. To avoid injury and other mishaps, keep children and pets away from heaters. Always remember, don't try to get a small device to do a big job.

For best results, direct the heat from a portable heater where you want it. It won't heat an entire room. Focus the heat where you need it - but not so close it can cause fires or burns.