

November Safety Tips: Cooler Weather and Holiday Season Increase Threat for Fires

South Carolina State Fire Marshal John Reich urges everyone to be safety conscious during colder weather and throughout the holiday season.

“Cold weather causes a higher fire threat due to increased uses of heating sources, such as electrical space heaters, fireplaces and wood stoves,” Reich said. “This, coupled with increased cooking activity, the use of extra holiday lights, candles and other decorations, pose an even greater threat for fires and fire deaths.”

Reich said the state struggles to keep the number of fire deaths down during the last few months of the year.

Be Safe Using Electric, Kerosene and Wood Heaters

In South Carolina, fire deaths typically increase during the colder months - November through February - and all too often are the result of improper use of heating systems. The major causes of home heating fires are from heaters, wood stoves and fireplaces due to:

- Leaving portable or space heaters unattended
- Fueling errors involving liquid or gas-fueled heaters
- Flaws in design, installation or use of heaters
- Placing things that can burn too close to space and portable heaters (This means curtains, walls, furniture, papers, etc.)
- Lack of regular cleaning of chimneys in fireplaces and wood stoves
- Trying to get a small device to do a big job

Keep Holiday Decorations Safe and Beautiful

The use of decorations and candles is a holiday tradition in many homes, but it is important to know that holiday decorations lead to added fire risks if safety precautions are not followed.

“Christmas Day, Christmas Eve, New Year’s Day, and New Year’s Eve are the top four days for home candle fires,” Reich said.

Christmas Trees

When keeping a cut tree in the house, special fire safety precautions need to be taken. A burning tree can rapidly fill a room with fire and deadly gases. Selecting a tree is the first step to safety. Make sure needles are green and hard to pull back from the branches. The trunk should be re-cut so it easily absorbs water. To avoid premature drying, keep your tree away from heat sources,

including sunlight, fireplaces and heating vents. Your tree should be kept in water throughout its recommended two-week life. Locate the tree away from exits and use only cool lamp listed and approved lights. The use of tree lights should be limited to only times when the room is occupied.

Cooking Safety

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

- Pay close attention while cooking, especially when using oils and grease.
- Keep cooking appliances clean of grease build-up, which can easily ignite.
- Don't try to carry a pan that's on fire. 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 the units are left in the "off" position.

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.

Holiday Lights

- Inspect holiday lights each year for frayed wires, bare spots, gaps in the insulation, broken or cracked sockets.
- To avoid overloading electrical outlets, do not link more than three light strands unless the directions indicate it is safe.
- Do not leave your lights burning overnight, or while you are away from home.

Candle Safety

Candles have become an increasingly popular decoration. Reich indicates candle usage in the home is on the increase, ultimately increasing the number of

home fires. Two out of five candle-caused home fires start in the bedroom. "Candles, as pretty as they may be, are a growing cause of home fires and home fire deaths," Reich said.

Reich offers the following tips:

- Place candles on stable furniture in sturdy holders that won't tip over.
- Keep candles away from clothing, books, paper, curtains, Christmas trees and holiday decorations.
- Extinguish candles when leaving a room or going to sleep.
- Discard taper and pillar candles once they are within two inches of the holder.
- Discard votive and filled candles before the last half-inch of wax starts to melt.
- Never put candles in windows or near doorways where drafts could bring flammable materials in contact with the open flame.
- Avoid using candles for light sources during power outages.

Although highly discouraged, if you must use candles in the bedroom:

- Keep candles at least one foot from bedding, curtains, blinds, wallpaper, upholstered furniture and other combustible materials.
- Place candles away from table edges.
- Don't allow children or teens to burn candles.
- Supervise children around burning candles. Remember, candles are not toys.

Reich also 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."

Reich says now is a good time to review your home escape plan, so in the event of a fire, everyone in your household knows how to get out quickly and safely. For even greater protection, consider installing a residential fire sprinkler system. Fire sprinklers actually stop the spread of fire using small amounts of water that protects life and property. Remember that fire safety is your responsibility and your preventive actions may save your or your family's life.

On behalf of the S.C. Office of the State Fire Marshal, have a fire safe holiday season.