

Keeping Unwanted Fires Out of Our Winter Season

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The time is once again here for Minnesota to blossom into the winter season. The winter holidays are a time for celebration, and that means more cooking, home decoration, and entertaining. More than ever, this is a time we must heighten our awareness and practice fire prevention. In 2003, 51% of all civilian fire deaths occurred between November and March. Fire deaths in greater Minnesota outpace those in the metropolitan area by a rate of slightly over two to one. Also in 2003, alcohol or other drug use was present or identified as a factor in one-third of all fire deaths and 60% of fire deaths were attributed to smoking. Tips for preventing an unwanted fire this winter:

Holiday Fire Safety

- Place holiday decorations well away from heat sources. If you use a living tree, water it daily.
- When decorating Christmas trees, always use safe tree lights (some lights are designed only for indoor or outdoor use, but not both). Larger tree lights should also have some type of reflector rather than a bare bulb and all lights should be listed by a testing lab.
- Never use electric lights on a metal tree.
- Always UNPLUG Christmas tree lights before retiring to bed or leaving home.
- Make sure the tree is at least three feet away from any heat source and try to position it near an outlet so that cords are not running long distances or under rugs. Do not place the tree where it may block exits.
- When buying an artificial tree, be sure it is labeled as fire retardant.
- Safely dispose of the tree when it begins dropping needles. Dried-out trees are highly flammable and should not be left in a house or garage or placed against the house.
- Don't mount lights in ways that can damage the cord's wire insulation (i.e. using clips, not nails).
- Keep children and pets away from light strings and electrical decorations.
- When decorating the tree, purchase tinsel or artificial icicles of non-leaded material. Choose decorations that are made with flame-resistant, flame-retardant or non-combustible material.
- Always dispose of wrappings immediately after opening gifts. Don't burn them; this can cause a chimney fire.
- Provide plenty of large, deep ashtrays and check them frequently. After holiday parties, check wastebaskets and furniture for smoldering cigarettes. Cigarette butts can smolder in the trash and cause a fire, so completely douse cigarette butts with water or discard into a can with a lid that are metal.
- Keep matches and lighters up high, out of sight and reach of children (preferable in a locked cabinet). When smokers visit your home, ask them to keep their smoking materials with them so young children to not touch them.

Cooking

- Unattended cooking is the leading cause of home fires in the U.S. When cooking for holiday visitors, remember to keep an eye on the range. If a pan does catch on fire, cover it with a lid. Water will spread the fire. Keep 3 feet clearance of combustibles near the stove/oven area.

Candles

- Place candles on a secure surface in sturdy non-combustible holders that won't tip over. Make sure holders are big enough to catch drippings.
- Keep candles away from children and pets. Candles should be out of children's reach.
- Keep candles away from combustible items such as curtains, books, and paper. Remember the "three-foot rule"- anything combustible needs to be kept three feet from a heat source.
- Keep candles away from flammable liquids. Do not use a candle for light when fueling a kerosene heater or lantern. The flame may ignite the fumes.
- Avoid using candles during a power outage. A flashlight is a safe option. Don't carry a lit candle.
- Remember to extinguish candles when leaving the room. Never have them in a children's room or leave children or pets unattended around candles.

Plan Ahead

- Keep your fire hydrant dug out of snow.
- Have working smoke alarms in your bedrooms, in the halls and on every level of the home.
- Have a charged ABC fire extinguisher. Place near the kitchen exit and know how to use and maintain it.
- Plan and practice a home escape and have a family meeting place in front of your home that your whole family has agreed on.
- Have your chimney inspected and cleaned. Don't discard fireplace ashes in a sack. Put them in a can and lid that are metal.
- Frozen water pipes? Never try to thaw them with a blow torch or other open flame. The pipe could conduct the heat and ignite the wall structure inside the wall space.
- Have a firefighter do a free, room-to-room check of your home to heighten your awareness of hazards and make prevention suggestions. Call the Spring Lake Park-Blaine-Mounds View Fire Department @ 763-786-4436 Ext. 104.

Fire is at the mercy of our good habits.