Preventing Home Fires in Winter

It was just a story when the Grinch stole Christmas. But fire is a real threat during the winter holidays. The worst 10 days for home fires are between December 24 and January 6. Let’s look at “four Cs” of winter fire risks (statistics are from the National Fire Protection Association):

1. Christmas trees

About 300 home fires start each year with Christmas trees (real and artificial). The leading causes: electrical malfunction, a heat source close to the tree, and children playing with fire.

What to do:

- Check for fresh, green needles when buying a cut tree.
- Be sure artificial trees are fire-retardant.
- Place the tree in a sturdy stand and at least three feet from any heat source.
- Give cut trees plenty of water daily.
- Use lights listed by a testing laboratory
- Connect no more than three strands of bulbs.
- Don’t use lights with loose bulbs or worn, frayed or broken cords.
- Unplug lights before leaving the house or going to bed.
- Place candles well away from tree branches.
- Dispose of the tree when it begins dropping needles.
- Do not leave a dried-out tree in the house or garage or placed against the house.

2. Chimneys

If you use your fireplace frequently during the winter and haven’t had your chimney cleaned within two years, you could be at risk for a chimney fire. Chimney fires can be noisy and may shoot dense smoke or flames out of the chimney—or can burn undetected. Any chimney fire can damage the chimney and house.

What to do:

- Have a professional inspect your chimney every year or two for creosote, the substance that builds up in the chimney and provides the fuel for the chimney fire.
- Use only seasoned, dry wood to minimize the formation of creosote. Don’t burn boxes, wrapping paper, trash or Christmas trees.
- Use paper or kindling, not flammable liquids, to start fires.
- Get enough air through the chimney. Closed glass doors or a narrow damper opening can keep smoke in the chimney longer.
- Don’t forget basic fireplace safety:
  - Use a sturdy screen to keep sparks in the fireplace.
  - Allow fireplace and woodstove ashes to cool before disposing in a metal container (kept a safe distance from your house).

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3. Candles

Christmas is the peak day for home candle fires, followed by New Year’s Day and Christmas Eve. Half of home candle fires start when a combustible item is left near a candle. About 40 percent of home candle fires begin in a bedroom. Mattresses and bedding, cabinetry, and window coverings are most commonly the first items to ignite.

What to do:
- Put out candles when leaving a room or going to sleep.
- Keep candles away from clothing, books, curtains, furniture, and other flammable items.
- Use sturdy candle holders that won’t tip over easily, that collect dripping wax, and are inflammable.
- Trim wicks to one-quarter inch.
- During power outages, avoid carrying a lit candle. Use flashlights.

4. Children

Winter and holiday traditions expose children to extra risks of fire. Don’t let their natural fascination with light and flame create danger.

What to do:
- Keep children away from light strings and decorations and the multitude of wires they require.
- Watch children around the tree.
- Be aware that candles, fireworks, stoves and cigarettes also draw children’s curiosity.
- Store matches and lighters out of reach, preferably in a locked cabinet. Use lighters.
- Use lighters with child-resistant features. About two of every three child-playing fires involve matches or lighters.
- Teach young children to tell an adult if they see matches or lighters.
- Don’t use flame as a source of amusement for children. They may imitate what you do.