



Fort Carson-MEDDAC News

Winter heating and safety

By: Jody Hughes, MEDDAC Safety Specialist

I don't know many people who truly enjoy the cold weather, as a matter of fact, I can't think of anyone. This fall was exceptionally mild, and if you are a Colorado native, you might have contemplated storing your summer clothes away for a while. I have reluctantly decided that I will probably not wear shorts again until April or May. Most people hang onto the holiday spirit and cheer with the same attitude. Who wants to let go of the festivities yet? That means taking the tree and Christmas lights down. For those who want to hang on to the spirit a little longer, and compensate for any bitter-cold weather, here are a few thoughts to keep you doing it safely.

Candle Safety

Who doesn't like candles? They smell nice, are mesmerizing to look at, and provide favorable ambient lighting for cozy activities. You probably received at least one candle for Christmas, right? Well, from 2006 to 2010, U.S fire departments responded to more than 11,000 home structure fires started by candles per year. Annually, these fires caused an average of 126 deaths, 953 injuries, and \$438 million in property damage. Thirty-five percent of those fires started in bedrooms, 16 percent started in living rooms, 14 percent in bathrooms, and 11 percent started in kitchens.

More than half of the home fires began because combustible materials were too close to a candle. Keep candles at least 12 inches away from anything that can burn. Blow them out when you leave the room. Did you ever dip your finger in the hot wax when you were young? Fire can be fascinating to young children. Kids playing with candles started four percent of these fires. Never leave a child unattended with a candle. Inappropriate containers or candles being bumped or knocked over caused another four percent of these fires. Keep them in a container that is not combustible, is sturdy, and away from surfaces where they may get hit. Finally, do not fall asleep with candles burning. Eleven percent of the fires pointed to sleep as a factor, resulting in 43 percent of deaths in home candle fires.



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Heating Equipment

Now that we have candles under control, we need to concentrate on keeping warm. In 2010, heating equipment was involved in an estimated 57,100 home structure fires in the U.S. This includes things like fireplaces, wood stoves, space heaters, central heating units, and water heaters. The fires killed 490 people, caused 1,530 injuries and cost \$1.1 billion in property damage.

Mechanical failure or malfunction are responsible for 12 percent of home heating fires. Always have a qualified professional install stationary heating equipment according to local codes and the manufacturer's instructions. Have this equipment inspected and serviced by a qualified professional every year. Most home heating fires occur during the late afternoon and early evening. Turn the heat down when temperatures are at their daily high and you are not likely to be home.

Portable space heater use results in far more fire losses than central heating equipment. If you insist on using portable space heaters, keep them at least three feet away from anything that can burn. Turn the heater off when you leave the room or go to bed. Inspect it for cracked or broken plugs and loose connections. Do not use extension cords or surge protectors with your electric space heaters. Plug them directly into the wall. If you use a portable kerosene heater, use the appropriate grade fuel and use the heater in a properly ventilated area, preferably outside. Never store the fuel near the heater and ensure that you have a functioning carbon monoxide alarm in your home.

Fireplaces

Nothing is as inviting as a roaring fire after shoveling snow in sub-zero temperatures. Although they are cozy, wood fireplaces require special safety considerations. Creosote is a by-product of wood burning. It is a combustible, oily, sticky substance that accumulates in your chimney as smoke rises and condenses to the chimney wall. Creosote can ignite if it builds up. These fires produce an estimated 14,380 home fires a year. Have your chimney inspected every year and cleaned, if necessary.

Make sure a sturdy screen is in front of your fireplace to stop sparks from flying into the room and igniting something. Most importantly, never leave the fireplace unattended.



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Enjoy the remainder of the holiday season, but do so safely. Take a minute to determine safe placement of space heaters and candles. Initiate a three foot "no play zone" around heaters and candles for kids. Finally, when you are done getting the lights down from the house, why don't you bring that ladder in and check those smoke detectors before you curl up by the fire?