



FIRE SAFE HOLIDAYS:
TIPS FROM THE DENVER FIRE DEPARTMENT

The year-end holiday season — Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Year’s — is also fire season, a prime time for residential fires. Decorative lights, combustible decorations, candles, special cooking, home decorating, parties where people drink and smoke and, most of all, the onset of the heating appliance season, all increase the likelihood of a fire. As the holidays approach, the Denver Fire Department is urging citizens to look for and eliminate potential dangers that could lead to fires and injuries.

Each year, hospital emergency rooms nationally treat about 10,800 people for injuries, such as falls, cuts and shocks related to holiday lights, decorations and Christmas trees. In addition, there are 11,000 candle-related fires each year resulting in 150 deaths and 1,200 injuries annually. Christmas trees are involved in about 600 fires annually, resulting in 50 deaths, 180 injuries and an average of more than \$15 million in property loss and damage.

The traditions of this season are beautiful, but candles, matches and lighters must be kept away from children. Make sure your holiday lights bear the name of an independent testing laboratory and follow the manufacturer’s instructions for installation and maintenance. We of the Denver Fire Department want to prevent wonderful traditions from becoming holiday tragedies.

Following are tips to keep your holidays safer.

GENERAL

- Discuss with family members how to call 911 for help if there is a fire or other emergency.
- If a fire starts in your house, escape to a neighbor's house and call 911.
- Give the dispatcher your name, address, phone number, and describe the type of emergency. Be clear and try to relax when answering questions from the dispatcher; confused answers could delay the Fire Department's arrival. Always wait for the dispatcher to hang up before you hang up.

HOLIDAY TREES AND DECORATIVE LIGHTS

Selecting the tree:

- Do not purchase your live tree too early or leave it up longer than two weeks.
- In selecting the tree, freshness is the best safety precaution. The higher the moisture content, the lower the fire hazard. Color may not be a good indicator, since some trees are sprayed green. Instead, check for freshness by testing the needles: they should bend, not break.
- Lift the tree and then tap the base gently on a firm surface. If many needles fall off, the tree is too dry.

Before placing the tree:

- Cut two inches off the trunk. Most tree vendors will do this for you upon request, or you may do it yourself when you get home.
- Use a sturdy, water-holding stand.
- If your stand is old and encrusted with mineral deposits, you can improve the tree's water intake by cleaning the stand using one capful of bleach to a cup of water. Scrub, then rinse thoroughly before adding the water for your tree to stand in.
- Place the tree outside in the stand filled with fresh water until ready to decorate.

Placement:

- Place the tree away from fireplaces, kerosene heaters, wall furnaces and other heat sources. Heat will dry out the tree, causing it to be more easily ignited by heat, flame or sparks.
- Don't block stairs or doorways.
- If necessary, secure the tree with wire to keep it from tipping.

Maintenance:

- A six-foot tree will use one gallon of water every two days!
- Keep watering your tree and check the water level every day.
- Mixing a commercial preservative with the water can further extend the life of the tree. (Don't try this if you have pets that like to drink from the stand!).

Decoration:

- Use only U.L.-approved lights.
- Never use more than three strands linked together.
- Inspect electric lights for broken or cracked sockets and frayed wires, and replace if necessary. Do not use indoor lights outdoors or vice versa.
- Do not overload extension cords, and do not connect more than three sets of lights to one cord. Outlets should be readily accessible for quick disconnection if necessary.
- Never use lighted candles on or near a tree or other decorations.
- All lights should be securely fastened to the tree.
- No bulbs should come into contact with needles or branches.
- Turn off all holiday lights when you go to bed or leave home.
- Avoid the use of extension cords.
- Never run an electrical cord under carpeting.
- Use miniature lights, which have cool-burning bulbs.
- Never use candles, even on artificial trees.
- Avoid placing small or breakable ornaments on lower branches where children or pets can reach them and knock them off. Every year many children are treated for cuts from broken ornaments, or from swallowing broken pieces and small parts.

Clean-up:

- Keep your tree for no longer than two weeks. Even if it hasn't been two weeks, dispose of the tree as soon as needles become brittle and begin to fall off.
- Dispose of the tree properly. Denver Recycles has official dates for tree collection and recycling; check www.denvergov.org for updates.
- **Never burn your tree in the fireplace.**

Artificial trees:

- Consider an artificial tree. They are much safer and cleaner. Make sure your artificial tree bears the U.L. label.
- Never use electric lights on metal trees like the old silver trees that are now becoming popular. To avoid electric shock on metal trees, use colored spotlights securely mounted above or below the tree, never fastened directly on it.

Outdoor lights:

- Follow all precautions, above, for indoor tree lights.
- In addition, outdoor lights should be weatherproof and clearly identified as designed for outdoor use.
- Remove outdoor lighting as soon as the season is over. Even outside lights are not designed to withstand prolonged exposure to winter weather.

CANDLES

- Use candles only on protected, heat-resistant surfaces, away from anything flammable and out of the reach of children and pets.
- **Never leave candles unattended, and never leave children or pets unattended in a room with lit candles.**

HOLIDAY ENTERTAINING

- 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 you allow cigarette smoking in your home, provide plenty of large, deep ashtrays and check them frequently. Cigarette butts can smolder in the trash and cause a fire, so completely douse cigarette butts with water before discarding.
- Even if you ask guests to smoke outside, provide large, deep ashtrays outside for cigarette butts. The bushes are very dry this time of year, and Denver Fire has responded to several fires started by careless smokers outside.
- After a party, always check on, between and under upholstery and cushions and inside trashcans for cigarette butts that may be smoldering.

- Keep matches and lighters up high, out of sight and reach of children. When smokers visit your home, ask them to keep their smoking materials with them so young children can't touch them.

FIREPLACES

- Have your fireplace and chimney cleaned and inspected before each heating season.
- Never use a flammable liquid to start a fire.
- Keep all combustibles away from hearth.
- Before starting a fire, make sure you remove all decorations from the area and be sure that the flue is open.
- Have a tight screen on the fireplace that completely covers the fireplace opening, and keep the screen closed when fireplace is in use.
- Do not burn wrappings or evergreen boughs. These can burn extremely fast, throwing off sparks and burning debris. Safely dispose of wrapping paper with your normal trash collection.
- Choose hardwoods, if possible. Soft woods like pine and spruce burn quickly, throwing dangerous sparks and coating the chimney with tars and resins that could catch fire later.
- Don't burn a large amount of trash in the fireplace. Roaring flames can ignite soot and resins clinging to the inside of the chimney and a serious fire could result.

Disposal of ashes:

- Remove ashes from your fireplace or stove on a regular basis. Use caution, as ashes can remain hot for several days.
- Remove ashes with a steel hand shovel with a handle long enough to keep your hand away from the ashes, and place them in a steel pail deep enough to accommodate all the ashes.
- Once the stove or fireplace is clean, place the pail outside, several feet away from the house or any combustibles.
- After the pail has been outside for several days you can then wet the ashes with a bucket of water or the garden hose. Be cautious; ashes may still be hot and cause steam when wetted.
- After the ashes are thoroughly wet you can place them in an outside trash receptacle. We recommend placing them on the street the same day as the other waste will be picked up. Once again, always use caution when dealing with ashes because even though they look like they are cool and no longer smoldering, there are usually pockets that remain hot and can smolder for

several days. Every year Denver Fire responds to several fires started by ashes being placed in wood or cardboard boxes and placed in a garage or shed.

FURNACES AND HEATING APPLIANCES

Furnaces:

- Have your furnace cleaned and inspected before each heating season.
- Clean your furnace filters on a regular basis.
- Do not keep storage around your furnace.

Space Heaters:

Please use extra precaution whenever using portable space heaters. According to the National Fire Protection Association, there have been over 60,000 fires caused by space heaters since 1998.

- Keep kerosene and electric heaters away from drapes and wall coverings.
- Keep children away from all heaters.
- Never use gasoline in your kerosene heater.
- Make sure your heater is clean and it carries an F.M. or U.L. listing.
- Always consult the owner's manual before using any portable heaters.
- Never leave heaters unattended.

Wood Stoves:

- If you are installing a wood stove, contact the Building Department for installation requirements.
- Make sure your stove carries a U.L. or F.M. listing.
- Inspect your stove on a regular basis, looking for cracks and similar defects. Also check legs, hinges, door seals and draft louvers.
- Never leave the stove unattended.
- Do not keep combustibles on or near stove.
- Do not burn trash in the stove.
- Empty ashes on a regular basis; put the ashes in a metal container with a tight-fitting lid. Put the container outside away from any structure.
- Always keep an ABC extinguisher nearby.
- See tips, above, for disposal of ashes.

HOME FIRE ESCAPE PLANNING

- Not just for holidays, but all year round, have a home fire escape plan ready.
- To start, draw a floor plan of your home showing all windows, doors, halls, stairs and bedrooms. Make sure all rooms, especially bedrooms, have at least two exits.
- Draw arrows on your plan to indicate normal exits. Mark emergency escape routes with lighter arrow. These alternative exits are to be used when normal exits are blocked. Test your escape routes.
- Make sure windows can be opened easily and that screens and storm windows can be removed from the inside. If your bedrooms are on the second floor, provide folding escape ladders.
- To account for everyone's safety, select and list on your plan a definite meeting place outside the house. Do not waste time gathering valuables or getting dressed. Assign someone to assist infants, elderly and handicapped family members.
- Be prepared to call the Fire Department from a neighbor's house by dialing 911 and follow the guidelines provided above under "General."
- Hold fire drills in your home, with all family members participating. This will test the practicality of your plan and give you a chance to practice escaping.

- Remember to crawl low under the smoke when exiting any building that is burning. Smoke is the reason most people die in a house fire. Also, remember to feel the door with the back of your hand before exiting or going through the door. If it's hot, don't go through it.

SMOKE ALARMS

Finally, as in every season, have working smoke alarms installed on every level of your home, test them monthly and keep them clean and equipped with fresh batteries at all times.

