

Cold Weather Fire Safety Tips for the Home

General tips for cold-weather safety in the home

- Have all heating appliances - furnaces, water heaters and wood stoves - checked and serviced yearly by a reliable professional.
- Make sure no flammable materials have been placed near any heating appliance over the summer, when the appliance was not in use.
- Use space heaters with care and inspect electric heaters for damaged cords.
- Make sure there is a working smoke detector on every level of the home. Check the batteries every six months (Daylight Saving Time in April and October are a good rule of thumb) and replace them yearly.
- Develop a home fire escape plan with two exits from every room. Establish a meeting place in a safe location so all family members can be accounted for. Call the fire department from a cordless phone, at a neighbor's home or other safe location. Never re-enter a burning building for any reason. Practice your home escape plan every six months and consider practicing it at night when most home fires occur.
- Consider installing carbon monoxide detectors on every level of the home, near sleeping areas where the audible alarm can be heard. If the alarm goes off, exit the home and call 911.
- Recognize the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning and exit the home immediately if you suspect the presence of carbon monoxide. Call 911 from a safe location.

Heating Without Getting Burned

Most home heating fires involve portable heaters and space heaters, with gas and kerosene heaters accounting for the highest fatality risk. But all heating systems, including fireplaces, can be dangerous if not used and maintained properly.

Before buying any heating equipment, check with your local fire department to ensure what you're buying conforms to local building or fire codes. When shopping for portable or space heaters, look for automatic shut-off safety features. All portable heaters should bear the mark of an independent testing laboratory indicating that the heater has met basic safety standards.

Wood-Burning Stoves

To protect the floor under wood-burning stoves from heat or stray embers, put down approved protection or a floor protector endorsed by a testing lab. Install wood-burning stoves at least three feet away from walls and furniture, unless the stove is rated for lesser clearance. Keep all combustible materials away from the stove and its chimney connection.

Fireplaces

When you use your fireplace, protect your home from sparks by using a fire screen made of sturdy metal or heat-tempered glass. Burn only seasoned wood. **DO NOT burn rubbish or scraps of treated lumber.** Add wood carefully; sparks can escape into the room while the screen is open. Be sure dampers are in working order, and never leave fires unattended, especially in an area used by children or pets.

Vents and Chimneys

All fueled heaters must be vented to prevent dangerous carbon monoxide build-up in your home. Creosote and carbon deposits caused by inefficient burning in fireplaces and wood stoves can coat chimney flues and pose a fire hazard. Have your chimney inspected by a professional before each heating season and have it cleaned if necessary. Unusually high concentrations of chimney deposits could mean your fireplace or wood stove is not burning efficiently and should be inspected for defects. If you use a wood stove, have the flue and chimney connection inspected and cleaned regularly. Consider installing a spark arrester on top of any chimney that vents a solid-fuel stove or fireplace.

Space Heaters

Give space heaters space. Keep all combustible materials away from portable and space heaters. Place all space heaters at least three feet from furniture, walls, curtains or anything else that could catch fire. Turn off space heaters when you leave home or go to bed.

Liquid Fuel Safety

If your space heater burns liquid fuel such as kerosene, let the heater cool down before refueling it. Adding fuel to a hot heater can cause fumes to ignite. Always refuel your heater outdoors in an area away from structures where a spill won't present a fire hazard. Use only the type of fuel recommended by the manufacturer. Never use a substitute or a lower-grade fuel. Never put gasoline in any space heater. Buy a fuel container for the space heater fuel that allows for safe storage of the fuel, and store the fuel in a garage or shed, not in the living area of your home.

Natural Gas-Fueled Heaters

Check vents periodically to make sure they aren't blocked. Never install un-vented heaters in bathrooms or sleeping areas. Carbon monoxide can build up to dangerous levels in small, enclosed spaces.

Electric Heaters

Inspect electric heater cords for cracks or other damage and have an electrician replace frayed or damaged cords. If cords overheat while the heater is on, have it inspected and serviced. Purchase electric heaters with a tip-over safety switch that turns the heater off if it is accidentally tipped over.

Central Heating Systems

Statistically, central heating systems are less likely to than portable or space heaters to cause home fires, but neglect can increase the risk to your safety. Never store combustible materials near a furnace and be sure that installation and automatic shut-off systems conform to local fire safety codes and are good working order. Have your furnace inspected and serviced if needed, yearly by a qualified professional. This checkup can prevent the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning.