

Winter Fire Safety

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) are working together to remind everyone that home fires are more prevalent in winter than in any other season. This is due in part to an increase in cooking and heating fires. Holiday decorations and winter storms that can interrupt electrical service and cause people to turn to alternative heating sources also contribute to the increased risk of fire in winter.

Winter fires can be prevented! The following fire safety tips can help you maintain a fire-safe home this winter season.

Wood Stoves

Wood stoves cause over 4,000 residential fires every year. Carefully follow the manufacturer's installation and maintenance instructions. Look for solid construction, such as plate steel or cast iron metal. Check for cracks and inspect legs, hinges and door seals for smooth joints and seams. Use only seasoned wood for fuel, not green wood, artificial logs, or trash. In pellet stoves, burn only dry, seasoned wood pellets. Inspect and clean your pipes and chimneys annually and check monthly for damage or obstructions.

Electric Space Heaters

Buy only heaters evaluated by a nationally recognized laboratory, such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL). Check to make sure it has a thermostat control mechanism, and will switch off automatically if the heater falls over. Heaters are not dryers or tables; don't dry clothes or store objects on top of your heater. Plug space heaters directly into wall outlets and never into an extension cord or power strip. Always unplug your electric space heater when not in use.

Kerosene Heaters

Buy only heaters evaluated by a nationally recognized laboratory, such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL), and check with your local fire department on the legality of kerosene heater use in your community. Never fill your heater with gasoline or camp stove fuel; both flare-up easily. Only use crystal clear K-1 kerosene. When refueling, allow the appliance to cool first and then refuel outside. Never overfill any portable heater. Use the kerosene heater in a well ventilated room.

Fireplaces

Fireplaces regularly build up creosote in their chimneys. They need to be cleaned out frequently and chimneys should be inspected for obstructions and cracks to prevent deadly chimney and roof fires. Check to make sure the damper is open before starting any fire. Never burn trash, paper or green wood in your fireplace. These materials cause heavy creosote buildup and are difficult to control. Use a screen heavy enough to stop rolling logs and big enough to cover the entire opening of the fireplace to catch flying sparks. Don't wear loose-fitting clothes near any open flame. Make sure the fire is completely out before leaving the house or going to bed. Allow ashes to cool before disposing of them. Place ashes in a tightly covered metal container and keep the ash container at least 10 feet away from your home and any other nearby buildings. Never empty the ash directly into a trash can. Douse and saturate the ashes with water.

Finally, having a working smoke alarm dramatically increases your chances of surviving a fire. And remember to practice a home escape plan frequently with your family.

Keep Fireplaces and Wood Stoves Clean

- Have your chimney or wood stove inspected and cleaned annually by a certified chimney specialist.
- Clear the area around the hearth of debris, decorations and flammable materials.

- Leave glass doors open while burning a fire. Leaving the doors open ensures that the fire receives enough air to ensure complete combustion and keeps creosote from building up in the chimney.
- Close glass doors when the fire is out to keep air from the chimney opening from getting into the room. Most glass fireplace doors have a metal mesh screen which should be closed when the glass doors are open. This mesh screen helps keep embers from getting out of the fireplace area.
- Always use a metal mesh screen with fireplaces that do not have a glass fireplace door.
- Install stovepipe thermometers to help monitor flue temperatures.
- Keep air inlets on wood stoves open, and never restrict air supply to fireplaces. Otherwise you may cause creosote buildup that could lead to a chimney fire.
- Use fire-resistant materials on walls around wood stoves.

Safely Burn Fuels

- Never use flammable liquids to start a fire.
- Use only seasoned hardwood. Soft, moist wood accelerates creosote buildup. In pellet stoves, burn only dry, seasoned wood pellets.
- Build small fires that burn completely and produce less smoke.
- Never burn cardboard boxes, trash or debris in your fireplace or wood stove.
- When building a fire, place logs at the rear of the fireplace on an adequate supporting grate.
- Never leave a fire in the fireplace unattended. Extinguish the fire before going to bed or leaving the house.
- Allow ashes to cool before disposing of them. Place ashes in a tightly covered metal container and keep the ash container at least 10 feet away from your home and any other nearby buildings. Never empty the ash directly into a trash can. Douse and saturate the ashes with water.

Protect the Outside of Your Home

- Stack firewood outdoors at least 30 feet away from your home.
- Keep the roof clear of leaves, pine needles and other debris.
- Cover the chimney with a mesh screen spark arrester.
- Remove branches hanging above the chimney, flues or vents.

Protect the Inside of Your Home

- Install smoke alarms on every level of your home and inside and outside of sleeping areas. Test them monthly and change the batteries at least once a year. Consider installing the new long life smoke alarms.
- Provide proper venting systems for all heating equipment.
- Extend all vent pipes at least three feet above the roof.