

Fires Cause Concern During the Holiday Season Due to Heating, Cooking and the Use of Candles

Cooking and heating related incidents are the leading cause of residential structure fires in South Carolina, accounting for almost 40% of the state's total reported structure fires. With the holidays approaching, warm, cozy homes and candle-lit holiday feasts play a major role in our preparations for family gatherings. It also increases the risks for fire. These fires can be prevented and losses reduced by simply following a few safety measures.

Cooking Safety

Pay particular attention while cooking, especially when using oils and grease. Cooking appliances should be kept clean of grease build-up, which can easily ignite. Applying a lid to a small grease fire is usually the most effective and safest method of controlling it. Trying to carry a pan that's on fire is extremely dangerous because it can ignite clothes or spill, causing severe burns. If the fire is inside your oven, turn off the heat and leave the door closed to cut off the fire's air supply. Young children should be kept away from cooking appliances to prevent any mishaps. It's always a good idea to use back burners when possible and keep pot handles turned to the inside so they won't be pulled or knocked over. Check stoves and other appliances before going to bed or leaving your home to make sure that the units are left in the "off" position. With the increased popularity of frying turkey, the National Fire Protection Agency and the National Burn Foundation warn consumers and discourage the use of turkey fryers. Tests have shown that many of the fryers have a risk of tipping over, overheating, or spilling hot oil, leading to fires and burns. The suggested alternative is to have a commercial professional prepare the turkey.

According to the National Candle Association seven out of 10 households use candles. Even as candle-caused fires increase, the number of home fires is dropping. So the proportion of home fires related to candles has been growing, according to a NFPA study. In 2001, candle fires accounted for 4.7 percent of home fires, compared with 1.1 percent in the early 1980's.

Candle Safety

- Extinguish all candles when leaving the room or going to sleep.
- Keep candles away from things that can catch fire, such as clothing, books, paper, curtains, Christmas trees, or decorations.
- Place candles on stable furniture in sturdy holders that won't tip over and that are big enough to collect dripping wax.
- Don't place lit candles in windows, where they may ignite blinds or curtains.
- Place candles only in areas where they won't be knocked over by children or pets.
- Extinguish taper and pillar candles when they get within two inches of the holder or decorative material. Extinguish votive and filled candles before the last half-inch of wax starts to melt.

"As we enter into the colder months of the year, typically November through February, heating related safety is of utmost concern. The majority of fire deaths occur during these four months and they are often related to inadequate heating systems or the improper use of heating systems", says John Reich, Deputy Director of the Division of Fire and Life Safety.

Heater Safety

ELECTRIC HEATERS

Electric heaters should have automatic safety switches to turn them off if tipped over. They also should carry the UL approval label. Be sure to check cords before plugging in the heater. If frayed, worn, or broken, do not use. Either replace the heater or have an electrician replace the cord. Just putting tape on the cord is not enough to prevent overheating and fire. Never use extension cords with portable heaters. To supply a heater with a small, ordinary household

extension cord will cause the cord to overheat and burn. Keep all materials that can burn at least 36 inches away from unit.

KEROSENE HEATERS

Many kerosene heater-related fires are attributed to the misuse or abuse of the devices itself. Get started on the right foot by purchasing a heater that carries the UL label. This means it has been tested for safety. Be sure it has an automatic safety switch to shut it off if it's tipped over. An automatic starter eliminates the need for matches and makes for safer starts. A fuel gauge will help ensure you do not overfill the heater dangerously. A safety grill on the front can prevent accidental contact burns. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for assembly. Use only crystal-clear 1K kerosene, never a yellow or contaminated kerosene or any other fuel. Fill it only outside. Store kerosene outside in a metal container with a tight fitting lid that is clearly marked for kerosene. When using kerosene heaters, be sure the room is well ventilated. Opening a door to an adjoining room or area may be enough. Better yet, slightly open a window in the room.

WOOD HEATERS

Wood stoves and other wood burning devices are popular heating systems. Before investing in one for your home, think as much about safety as you will about ease of use, efficiency and appearance. Have your stove installed by a professional. Keep a tight fitting screen or glass doors in front of the stove or fireplace at all times. Special retaining screens can keep children and pets away from wood stoves and prevent burns. Dispose of ashes in metal containers, never in paper bags, cardboard boxes, or plastic wastebaskets. Wet ashes down to cool them thoroughly. Remember, ashes can retain enough heat to cause a fire for several days, so take no chances. Although these tips should help prevent a fire, know the signs of danger. A loud roar, sucking sounds and shaking pipes mean trouble and danger. If you hear these sounds, get everyone out of the house. Quickly shut off the fire's air supply by closing any air intake vents in the firebox. Close the damper. Call the fire department from a nearby phone.

Keep any heater at least three feet away from anything that might burn. This means curtains, walls, furniture, papers, etc. To avoid injury and other mishaps, keep children and pets away from heaters. ALWAYS REMEMBER, don't try to get a small device to do a big job. For best results, direct the heat from a portable heater where you want it. It won't heat an entire room. Focus the heat where you need it - but not so close it can cause fires or burns.

Working smoke alarms should be a priority at any time of year. Smoke alarms should be placed between the kitchen and living area and should be in working order to provide early warning of a fire. "With the use of modern technology, many communities in the United States are taking safety a step further by installing residential sprinkler systems. These systems quickly control the fire causing little or no damage, preventing the loss of life and property", Mr. Reich added.