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State Fire Marshal Offers Winter Holiday Safety Tips
There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan said, "There is no place like home for the holidays and a few simple steps will keep your home safe for your family and guests this holiday season." Coan added, "When we gather for the holidays, we usually gather around the table for a meal. Cooking is the leading cause of home fires throughout the year, and causes about one-half of fires during the holiday season."

One December 25, 2006, at 2:37 p.m., the Melrose Fire Department was called to a reported cooking fire in a single-family home. A stovetop grease fire began when cooking was left unattended and quickly spread to other parts of the kitchen. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the occupants and there were no injuries associated with this fire. The total estimated dollar loss from this fire was \$11,500.

One January 1, 2007, at 4:39 a.m., the Chelsea Fire Department was called to a reported cooking fire in a three-unit apartment building. A stovetop grease fire in the second floor apartment quickly spread to other parts of the kitchen when the occupant fell asleep. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the occupants. The total estimated dollar loss from this fire was \$1,000 and there were two fire service injuries associated with this fire.

Prevent Candle Fires: Follow the Circle of Safety Rules

"So many of our holiday rituals involve candles, so we need to be especially careful with them at this time of year," Coan said.

On December 24, 2006, at 3:00 p.m., the Scituate Fire Department was called to a fire in a two-family home. A candle left burning unattended on a bureau in the living room ignited a holiday decoration. Smoke detectors were present and operated, although none of the occupants were home.

On December 24, 2006, at 6:13 p.m., the Wilmington Fire Department was called to a fire in a single-family home. A candle in the first floor living room ignited one of the holiday decorations. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the residents. The two residents were injured while extinguishing the fire. The total estimated dollar loss was \$10,000.

“When candles come in contact with holiday decorations, are left burning unattended, burn down too close to the holder, or are knocked over by pets or children, fires start easily and spread quickly,” Marshal Coan warned. “Please burn candles inside of a one-foot *Circle of Safety*, free of anything that can burn,” he added.

Electric Holiday Lights

Purchase new lights that are listed by an approved testing agency such as Underwriter’s Laboratory (UL) or Factory Mutual (FM). Today’s lights come with fuses that will blow long before the household wiring heats up. Be sure to follow the manufacturer’s directions.

Check lights carefully for frayed wires, broken plugs or sockets and loose connections. Holiday lights are used year after year. Discarding and replacing damaged lights is less expensive than having a fire. When putting lights on a Christmas tree, make sure the bulb itself is not touching the tree. Keep decorations that use bulbs away from items such as curtains that could catch fire.

Turn off your tree lights and electric decorations whenever leaving the house and before you going to sleep. Lights can short circuit or overheat and start a fire. Avoid overloading extension cords, a common cause of fires, by using no more than three strands of lights on a single extension cord. Remember to never put cords under rugs or behind furniture that can “pinch” them and cause fires.

On December 29, 2006, at 10:21 p.m., the Lawrence Fire Department was called to a fire in a three-unit apartment building. A power strip that was powering the lights on the Christmas tree in the living room started the fire. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the residents. There were no injuries associated with this fire. The total estimated dollar loss was \$250,000.

Cut Tree Safety

- Water a live tree every day.
- Buy a cut tree as fresh as possible. A newly cut tree properly cared for, can stay green and fire safe for several weeks.
- Never use a cut tree in a place of public assembly (such as an office, apartment or hotel lobby, restaurant, etc.).
- Turn off the lights when leaving the house or going to bed for the night.
- Never use lighted candles as decorations.

How to Select a Tree

Lift the tree and tap the butt on the ground. If green needles fall off, the tree is too dry! Grab a branch near the top and pull your hand along it slowly. Needles should not fall off. The tree is already quite dry if you bend a needle and it breaks before bending in half.

Putting Up the Tree

Make a fresh cut an inch or two off the bottom to help with absorption, right before placing it in the stand. A tree will try to “heal its wound” by enclosing the previous cut in sap and this hinders water absorption.

Place your tree in a non-tip style stand with wide feet. Make sure it cannot be tipped over by children or pets. Use extra wires if needed.

Placing the Tree

Put trees and other decorations out of the way of traffic. Keep doorways and exits clear.

Place your tree and other decorations away from heaters, fireplaces, candles and all other sources of heat and flame. Heat makes a tree dry out faster and any heat source could make it catch fire.

Dispose of Your Tree Carefully

Remove a holiday tree soon after the holidays. A dry tree is fuel for a fire both inside and outside the house. An abandoned tree is frequently attractive to vandals so take advantage of your community’s pick-up day if available.

Christmas Tree Fires Infrequent But Deadly

Since people stopped putting lit candles on Christmas trees and standards were set for electric lights, the number of Christmas tree fires has been significantly reduced. However, the National Fire Protection Association reports that those Christmas tree fires that do occur, tend to be extremely dangerous. On average, one of every 22 reported home Christmas tree fires in the nation resulted in a death. Last holiday season there were 6 reported Christmas tree fires in Massachusetts, 4 of which were inside the home.

On December 25, 2006, at 2:50 p.m., the Dartmouth District #3 Fire Department was called to a fire in a single-family home. The fire was started on the Christmas tree in the living room. Fortunately there were no injuries associated with this fire even though the occupants tried to put it out themselves. The house was totally destroyed.

Artificial Trees

Select an artificial tree with a flame retardant label. These are best for families who want a tree but will be away for several days or who may otherwise not be able to care properly for a live tree. Do not use electric lights on metal trees; faulty lights could charge the tree and electrocute anyone who touched it. Spotlights provide safer and more effective illumination.

On December 25, 2006, at 4:49 p.m., the Chelsea Fire Department was called to a fire in a two-family home. In the first floor living room, an artificial Christmas tree with pre-strung lights ignited and started the fire. Five firefighters were injured fighting this fire. The total estimated dollar loss was \$225,000.

On December 4, 2006, at 6:52 p.m., the Lawrence Fire Department was called to a fire in a 48-unit apartment building. An overloaded extension cord ignited an artificial Christmas tree in a fifth floor living room. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the occupants and no one was injured at this fire. There were no sprinklers present. The total estimated dollar loss was \$100.

Outdoor Decorations

Be sure to use only lights rated for outdoor use. Securely anchor outdoor lights and decorations against wind and storms with insulated holders or hooks; do not drive nails, staples or tacks through wiring insulation, which can cause a fire. All outdoor electrical decorations should be plugged into a ground-fault circuit interrupter (GFCI). You can buy portable units for outdoor use, or you can have them permanently installed by an electrician. Bring outdoor electrical lights inside after the holidays to prevent hazards and extend their life.

For more information on fire safety, contact your local fire department or the Office of the State Fire Marshal at 1-877-9 NO FIRE or on-line at www.state.ma.us/dfs and look for Fire Safety Topics.