

Cold Weather Brings Use of Various Heating Systems

With the approach of cold weather, it becomes even more important to check the heating system, space heaters, fireplaces and smoke alarms to prevent a destructive or even deadly fire, according to the National Fire Safety Council. The council said 28,000 people are injured in two million fires each year with 4,275 fire deaths. Nationwide there is a fire death every 130 minutes.

A spokesman for the local fire department said heating is the second leading cause of home fires. Any material that can burn should be kept at least three feet away from any heater.

Working smoke alarms are the first defense against fire, the national council said. A working smoke alarm can detect a small fire and provide crucial minutes necessary to prevent a tragedy. Approximately 90 percent of all homes have at least one smoke alarm, the council said, but surveys show that 20 percent do not work because the battery is either dead or missing.

Both homeowners and renters should be aware of fire safety, and renters also should be aware they should have inexpensive renter insurance in case of fire damage. Insurance carried by owners of rental property does not cover tenants.

The Insurance Information Institute says fire breaks out in a home somewhere in the United States every 45 seconds and suggests three basic things to help ensure home safety. The institute suggests eliminate potential fire hazards, install and maintain smoke detectors and develop and practice a family escape plan.

Eliminating hazards includes keeping trash in covered containers and disposing of it regularly, storing any flammable liquids in proper containers, avoiding overloading electrical circuits and frayed cords and being sure the home's electrical system and heating system is safe.

Heating system installers and maintenance companies suggest those systems be checked before cold weather puts a strain on the system. Now is the time to have preventive maintenance checks to be sure everything is operating properly and to make any minor adjustments or repairs before serious problems develop.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and U.S. Fire Administration, the high cost of home heating fuels and utilities has caused many to search for alternate sources of home heating.

The use of wood burning stoves is growing and space heaters are selling rapidly or coming out of storage. Fireplaces are burning wood and man-made logs.

While these methods of heating may be acceptable, they also are a major contributing factor in residential fires. Many of these fires can be prevented by following fire safety tips to maintain a safe home.

Be sure any heater is in good working condition and has an emergency shut off in case it is tipped over. Never burn fuel in a heater without proper ventilation and always use the recommended fuel for the heater.

Keep flammable liquids in approved metal containers and never refill a heater while it is operating or hot. Refueling with liquids should be done outside. Be sure any wood burning fireplace or stove is installed properly and has appropriate ventilation. Have the chimney inspected and cleaned and be sure any flue is cleaned. Check chimneys or vents for creosote buildup and keep them clean.

Keep a glass or metal screen in front of the fireplace opening to prevent embers from jumping out.

Be sure all furnace controls and emergency shutoffs are working properly and check flue pipe seams and chimneys to be sure they are solid.

Never discard hot ashes inside the home. Place them in a metal container outside and as far from the house as possible.

Be sure any flammable material such as curtains, bedding or furniture is at least three feet away from any heater and never stand close to a heater, especially wearing flowing clothing that could catch fire.

The National Fire Safety Council said most home fires occur during sleeping hours, between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. and one or more smoke alarms can double a family's safety.

The council suggested placing a smoke alarm on each level of the home, near bedrooms and in the basement. They should be kept clean and batteries should be replaced twice a year.

Working fire extinguishers, at least two, can help control or extinguish a small fire, but the council urges first to be sure everyone is out of the house and that someone is calling the fire department.

Be familiar with extinguisher operation and only attempt to fight a small fire that is contained to one area and be sure there is an escape route clear of obstacles to your back. Don't stay in a room where there is smoke or fumes since most fire deaths result from smoke or fumes and not from heat or flames.

The council said more than a third of all fire-related injuries occur while people are trying to fight fires. "If you are unsure about fighting a small fire – don't," the council said. "Leave the area and call for help."

In all of the fire safety instructions from FEMA, the U.S. Fire Administration, the National Fire Safety Council and Insurance Information Institute, the central theme is common sense. Look around the house and eliminate any fire hazards, be sure any electrical or fuel-burning systems or units operate properly and if a fire does occur, don't take chances. Put safety first and call the professionals.