

Home Safety Tips for the Holidays

by Karin Nead

The holidays are a joyous time for most families. Decorating together is an annual event and family gatherings seem to last all season. Safety may not be on the forefront of everyone's mind; but, no one wants to spend a night in the emergency room, especially during the holidays. Being aware of common dangers can help prevent this season from becoming a disastrous one.

One of the biggest holiday decorations, and main safety hazards, is the Christmas tree. When purchasing a cut tree, be sure to check for freshness. Dry, brittle needles pose a hazard when lights are placed on the tree. Grabbing the branch firmly at the base and pulling towards you will show how fresh the tree is. If you end up with a hand full of loose needles, the tree is already drying out and will pose a risk. In addition, the bottom of the trunk should be sticky with resin and the needles should bend, not snap, when bent. Be sure to keep the water reservoir filled to prevent the tree from drying out once you've gotten it home. If you're purchasing an artificial tree, be sure to choose one labeled "fire resistant." No matter what type of tree you decide on, always keep the tree and its decorations away from heat sources; fireplaces, radiators and portable heaters combined with trees and decorations are a hazardous combination. Also be sure to keep the tree out of walkways to prevent trips and falls.

When decorating your tree, stay away from combustible materials such as Styrofoam and paper materials. Those cute hand-made decorations the kids bring home should be relegated to areas of the home out of the way of lights and other heat sources. Stick to flame-resistant materials when trimming the tree, including faux icicles and tinsel. Glass, plastic and non-leaded metals are best. Be sure to check all tree lights before use, even if you've just purchased them. Plug lights in and make sure all bulbs are functional and there are no frayed wires or loose connections before placing them on the tree.

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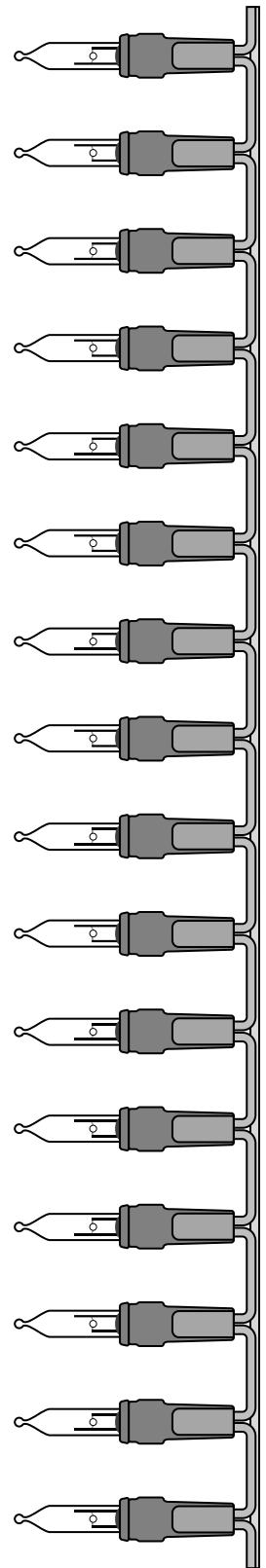
Trees aren't the only decorating hazard in the home. Before using decorative lights outdoors, be sure they are certified for outdoor use and plugged into circuits with ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCI) to avoid shocks. Always unplug all lights before leaving the house or going to bed to prevent a short from starting a fire. Never use lit candles as decorations near trees or draperies; place candles in areas where they won't be knocked over and never leave them unattended when lit. And after opening gifts, immediately remove all wrapping paper, bags, ribbons and bows from tree and fireplace areas to prevent fires. Do not burn wrapping paper in the fireplace. A flash fire may result, as wrapping paper ignites suddenly and burns intensely.

Mobile homes seem to be even more susceptible to holiday tragedies caused by fire. In fact, three times as many people die in mobile home fires, proportionately, than in single and two-family home fires. The primary reason is that fire spreads rapidly through mobile home contents, while the structure itself intensifies heat and smoke buildup. Plus, most mobile homes have fewer safe exits than a traditional home. The biggest hazard in mobile homes during the holidays is overloading electrical circuits when decorating. Protect yourself by closely monitoring your electrical use. When one powerful electrical appliance is in use, keep the use of others to a minimum. Don't overload the circuits by connecting multiple strands of lights together from one outlet. Never leave electrical appliances operating unattended. And, as with any home, be sure your smoke detectors are installed and operational. You should have a minimum of one outside each bedroom area and one in the kitchen area.

Holiday celebrations usually mean lots of food. Keep your family safe from food-borne illnesses by fully cooking meats and poultry; prevent cross contamination by keeping raw and cooked foods separate and using separate utensils when preparing and serving them. Thaw meats in the refrigerator, not on the counter. And, with so many people coming and going, be careful to place hot foods and liquids away from the edges of counters and tabletops to prevent spills and burns. And, since many families serve alcohol along with the holiday meal, always use a designated driver. If you are the host of the holiday gathering, be sure there are non-alcoholic beverages available for guests who are driving.

There are many risks to you and your family during the holiday season. But, with just a little proper planning and some extra vigilance, everyone can enjoy a safe, fun holiday—without a trip to the emergency room.

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