

Contra Costa County



Fire Protection District

Fire Chief

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTRA COSTA FIRE DISTRICT URGES FIRE SAFETY IN WINTER, HOLIDAYS

During the winter months, residential fires are more prevalent than they are in the spring or summer, according to the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. In the winter, although total fires decrease, structure fires increase, mainly due to the misuse of heating appliances. In an average year, nationally, heating appliances cause nearly 17 percent of structure fires; however, during the winter, heating fires jump to 27 percent of most structure fires. Since colder temperatures result in longer operating time for heating equipment, there is more opportunity for that equipment to cause a fire.

With colder temperatures and the high cost of home heating fuels and utilities, many people resort to using fireplaces, wood stoves, space heaters, and other alternative heating methods to keep warm. All of these methods of heating are acceptable when used safely; however, they are also major contributors to residential fires. Many of these fires can be prevented! The following fire safety tips can help you maintain a fire-safe home this winter.

Wood Stove and Fireplaces

Wood stoves and fireplaces are becoming a very common heat source in homes. Careful attention to safety can minimize their fire hazard. To use them safely:

- Be sure the fireplace or stove is installed properly. Wood stoves should have adequate clearance (36 inches) from combustible surfaces and proper floor support and protection.
- Wood stoves should be of good quality, solid construction, and design. Purchase wood stoves evaluated by a nationally recognized laboratory, such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL).
- Have the chimney or flu inspected annually and cleaned if necessary, especially if it has not been used for some time.
- Is the chimney solid, with cracks or loose bricks? Cracks in the masonry could also mean an unsafe flu.
- All fireplaces and wood stoves should have an approved spark arrestor.
- Do not use flammable liquids to start or accelerate any fire.
- Keep a glass or metal screen in front of the fireplace opening, to prevent embers or sparks from jumping out, unwanted material from going in, and help prevent the possibility of burns to occupants.
- Don't use excessive amounts of paper to build roaring fires in fireplaces. It is possible to ignite creosote in the chimney by overbuilding the fire.
- Never burn charcoal indoors. Burning charcoal can give off lethal amounts of carbon monoxide.
- Keep flammable materials such as holiday decorations, paper and kindling used to start the fire, away from your fireplace mantel. A spark from the fireplace could easily ignite these materials.

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- Before you go to sleep, be sure your fireplace fire is out. Use a long handled noncombustible tool to lightly stir the ashes. Never use a gloved or bare hand even when you can't see any embers. Hot embers buried deep in the ashes can smolder for many hours.
- NEVER close your damper with hot ashes in the fireplace. A closed damper will help the fire to heat up again and will force toxic carbon monoxide into the house.
- When discarding ashes from the fire place or wood burning stove ALWAYS place them in a metal can or bucket with a tight fitting lid and place them outside of the home on a concrete walk or slab. Place container in a location where pets and children where it cannot be knocked over. Never place ashes even if you think they are out in a plastic bag or container, paper bag or dump them in your garbage can.
- If synthetic logs are used, follow the directions on the package. NEVER break a synthetic log apart to quicken the fire or use more than one log at a time. They often burn unevenly, releasing higher levels of carbon monoxide.

Furnaces

It is important that you have your furnace inspected to ensure that it is in good working condition. Do not attempt repairs yourself: leave furnace repairs to qualified specialists.

- Be sure all furnace controls and emergency shutoffs are in proper working condition.
- Inspect the walls and ceiling near the furnace and along the chimney line. If the wall is hot or discolored, additional pipe insulation or clearance may be required.
- Check the flue pipe and pipe seams. Are they well supported and free of holes and cracks? Soot along or around seams may be an indicator of a leak.
- All unused flue openings should be sealed with solid masonry.
- Keep trash and other combustibles away from the heating system.

Kerosene Heaters

All fuel-burning appliances can be dangerous when used improperly. ALWAYS read the manufacturers cautions.

- Be sure your heater is in good working condition. Inspect exhaust parts for carbon buildup. Be sure the heater has an emergency shut off in case the heater is tipped over.
- Never use fuel-burning appliances without proper room venting. Burning fuel (coal, kerosene, or propane for example) can produce deadly fumes.
- Use ONLY the fuel recommended by the heater manufacturer. NEVER introduce a fuel into a unit not designed for that type fuel.
- Keep kerosene, or other flammable liquids stored in approved metal containers, in well ventilated storage areas, outside of the house.
- NEVER fill the heater while it is operating or hot. Follow manufacturer's instructions. When refueling an oil or kerosene unit, avoid overfilling. Cold fuel may expand in the tank as it warms up. Refueling should be done outside of the home (or outdoors).
- Keep young children away from space heaters – especially when they are wearing pajamas or other loose clothing that can be easily ignited.

Winter Storm Fire Safety

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During and after a winter storm, Damaged or downed utility lines can present a fire and life safety hazard. Water damaged appliances and utilities can be electrically charged. To safeguard yourself, your family and your home from these potential hazards, please follow these safety tips.

Generator Safety

Generators are often used during power outages. Generators that are not properly used and maintained can be hazardous. Always locate the generator outside of the home. Exhaust from a generator can kill. NEVER use propane fueled appliances inside the home.

Follow the manufacturer's instructions and guidelines when using a generator. Always use a generator or other fuel-powered machines outside of the home. Carbon monoxide fumes are odorless and can quickly overwhelm you indoors.

Always be sure that every level of your home has a working smoke alarm, and be sure to test and clean it on a monthly basis. Plan and practice a home escape plan with your family.

Chemical Safety

Look for combustible liquids like gasoline, lighter fluid, and paint thinner that may have spilled. Thoroughly clean the spill and place the containers in a well ventilated area. All materials (rags) used for the clean-up should be place outside of the home and disposed with properly. Never throw oily or greasy rags in the garbage. Remember to keep combustible liquids away from any heat source.

Electrical Safety

If your home has sustained flood or water damage, and you can safely get to the main breaker of fuse box, turn off the power. Assume all wires on the ground are electrically charged. This includes cable feeds. Look for and replace frayed or cracked extension cords, loose prongs, and plugs; exposed outlets and wiring could present a fire and life safety hazard. Appliances that emit smoke or sparks should be repaired or replaced. Be sure to have a licensed electrician check your home for any damage.

Gas Safety

Smell and listen for leaky gas connections. If you believe there is a gas leak, immediately leave the house and leave a door or a window open and turn of the gas supply at the meter. Utility companies will assess the meter and connections and relight you pilot light for you. Never strike a match: any size flame can spark an explosion. Before turning the gas back on, have the gas system checked by a professional.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District is a full-service fire agency that provides fire and emergency medical services to 600,000 people across a 304 square-mile area, including nine cities and many unincorporated areas. More information is at www.cccfpd.org