

Contra Costa County



Fire Protection District

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Decorate Safely for the Holiday Season

Keep your holidays injury-free with these important safety tips

In addition to food, family, and gifts, decorations are one of the reasons that many look forward to the holiday season. While candles, Christmas trees, and other decorations are part of the holiday spirit, they can pose fire and poisoning hazards, especially to curious children.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, Safe Kids USA and the United States Fire Administration remind parents and caregivers to take a few precautions when decorating for Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and other festivities.

Wintertime is the most dangerous time of the year for injuries and deaths from fire. Each year, approximately 450 children ages 14 and under die in residential fires; children under the age of 5 are at the greatest risk. "Never, never leave lit candles unattended," says Suzanne Morton, Safe Kids USA fire and burn safety program manager. "Don't put candles on a tree or a natural wreath, or near curtains or drapes, and keep matches and lighters locked out of reach of children."

In 2005, candles started an estimated 15,600 home fires in the United States, and the top four days for candle fires are around Christmas and New Year's, according to the National Fire Protection Association. Battery-operated flameless candles are an alternative that does not have a fire risk. Decorative lighting should be labeled with the seal of an independent testing lab and should only be used outdoors if it's labeled for outdoor use.

"Make sure your smoke alarms are working and that your children can hear them while they are sleeping; make and practice a home fire escape plan; and follow basic safety tips regarding holiday decorating," said Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Fire Marshal Richard Carpenter.

If you decorate a tree, we recommend these precautions:

- Never leave a lighted Christmas tree or other decorative lighting display
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unattended. Inspect lights for exposed or frayed wires, loose connections, and broken sockets. Do not overload extension cords or outlets and do not run an electrical cord under a rug.

- Natural Christmas trees always involve some risk of fire. To minimize the risk, get a fresh tree and keep it watered at all times. Do not put the tree within three feet of a fireplace, space heater, radiator, or heat vent.
- Decorate with children in mind. Do not put ornaments that have small parts or metal hooks, or look like food or candy, on the lower branches where small children can reach them. Trim protruding branches at or below a child's eye level, and keep lights out of reach.
- Do not burn Christmas tree branches, treated wood, or wrapping paper in a home fireplace.

Safe Kids USA also offers these tips to prevent poisoning:

- Keep alcohol (including baking extracts) out of reach and do not leave alcoholic drinks unattended.
- Color additives used in fireplace fires are a toxic product and should be stored out of reach. Artificial snow can be harmful if inhaled, so use it in a well-vented space.
- Mistletoe berries, Holly Berry and Jerusalem Cherry can be poisonous. If they are used in decorating, make sure children and pets cannot reach it.
- In a poison emergency, call the national Poison Control Center at 800-222-1222.

For more information about holiday safety, call 202-662-0600 or visit the fire and poisoning prevention pages at www.usa.safekids.org. For in-depth fire safety information, visit the USFA's fire safety Web site at www.usfa.dhs.gov/citizens.

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. Visit our web site at www.cccfpd.org