

Don't forget these safety tips during the holidays

By JENNIFER COLTON

Holiday celebrations add long-term memories, but most of us would rather avoid having emergency responders crash the party. Keeping your holiday celebrations safe often involves being aware of what is going on and where potential hazards lie. Local experts say holiday fires fall into three main categories: electrical, decoration-related, and cooking fires.

Heating: As the weather turns cooler, home heating systems need to be cleaned out and prepared for the fall and winter months, but when it comes to the holidays, extra guests may mean extra space heaters – and that can increase fire risk.

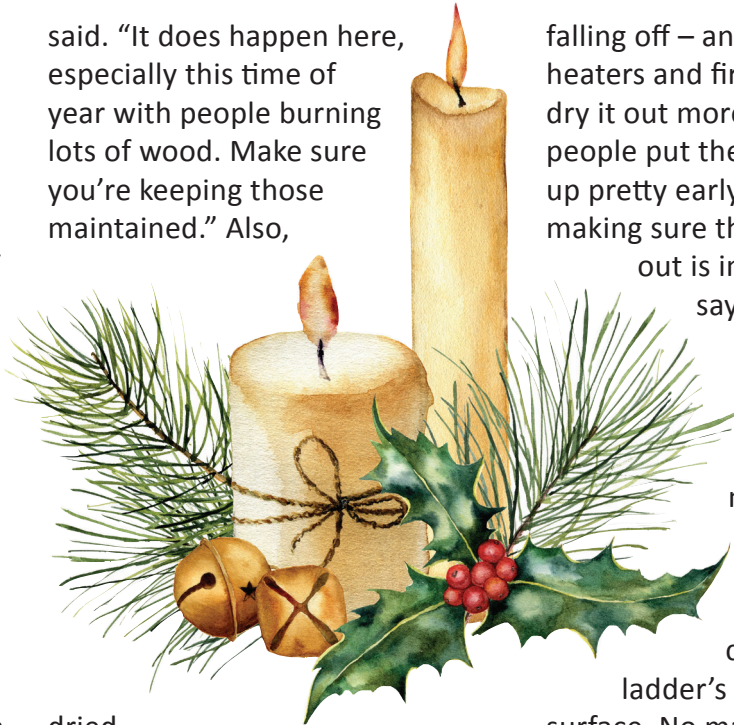
Scott Goff, fire marshal for Umatilla County Fire District #1, says at this time of year the fire calls they get usually have to do with home heating. “People use portable heaters and put them too close to combustibles; they connect extension cords to the heaters and they leave the cord coiled up so they can’t dissipate the heat off it. Extension cords should be stretched out.”

Goff says extension cords should only be used with appliances on a temporary basis and never on large appliances like refrigerators and freezers.

Also make sure flammable items and furniture is not placed over baseboard heaters. If you are using your fireplace for the first time in some months, have the flue swept clean by a professional to reduce the risk of a chimney fire.

“We do get a handful of seasonal chimney fires,” Pendleton Fire Department Lt. Jeff Perry

said. “It does happen here, especially this time of year with people burning lots of wood. Make sure you’re keeping those maintained.” Also,



dried wood produces less flammable material in your chimney.

With any heating source, teach kids about the rules and risks for being near it. Make sure they know in advance how close they can get to a heater and what could happen if they break the rules.

Decorations: Lighting is traditional at many winter holiday celebrations, but candles start two out of five home decoration related fires. The Oregon State Fire Marshal recommends using battery-operated flameless candles, but if you prefer traditional candles, make sure to keep all flammable items at least one foot – ideally three feet – away from the flame. Never leave a burning candle unattended and make sure it’s on a nonflammable surface. And again, talk with any children at home about the rules around open flame and the risks of playing with fire.

With your holiday Christmas tree, choose one with a lot of moisture – needles should not be

falling off – and keep it away from heaters and fireplaces that could dry it out more quickly. “A lot of people put their Christmas trees up pretty early in the season, so making sure they don’t get dried out is important,” Perry

says. “Keep it watered.”

While putting up your decorations, use ladders and step stools made for climbing, rather than climbing onto a pile of whatever might be convenient. Keep the ladder’s feet on a firm, level surface. No matter how earnestly Uncle Bob claims he can hang the lights while standing on a chair on top of the car, it’s probably a bad idea.

Cooking fires: The good news: you’ve already survived Thanksgiving, the peak day for home cooking fires. The bad news: Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are the second and third mostly likely days in the year to have a home cooking fire, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

Unattended cooking is the leading cause of cooking fires – and fatalities. Goff says his district responded to almost a dozen cooking fires in 2018. “Certainly going into the holidays, we want to make sure that people aren’t getting distracted while they’re cooking,” he notes. “Any time you have something out of the routine, that increases the risk you’ll be distracted.”

The U.S. Fire Administration says always pay attention to food that is cooking – especially when frying or cooking on the stove top

– and to keep young children at least three feet away from a stove or grill, as well as anything that might catch fire.

Other holiday concerns: You can reduce your risk of injury from a fire by always having a clear escape route and making sure everyone in the home – even overnight guests – knows the escape plan. As furniture is moved to make way for guests and decorations, be aware of how that might slow people and pets from getting out during a fire – and how it could impact firefighters who respond.

“With the holidays and the extra people, homes get cluttered,” Perry said. “Items can block escape routes and add more fuel to a fire – which makes it hard to put out and harder to get in and save people.”

Take a critical look at your holiday decorations and rearrangement of furniture to make sure everyone can escape – just in case.

If you are heading somewhere else this holiday season, be prepared for extra traffic and winter weather. Keep an emergency kit in your vehicle and keep your attention on the road.

“The number one thing is to just slow down,” said Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan. “Drive for the conditions and leave yourself plenty of time to get where you need to.”

Keep your family safe and let the firefighters and emergency responders enjoy their own holiday celebrations.

Jennifer Colton is news director of KOHU and KQFM, and mother of three, based in Pendleton.