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## Stay safe with 10 steps to protect home, family

**MARK COOMES**  
Gannett News Service

The United States has one of the highest fire-related mortality rates in the industrialized world.

Nearly 4,000 people -- not including firefighters -- died last year, according to the National Fire Protection Association. About 80 percent of those deaths occurred in homes.

Furnaces, fireplaces and space heaters are the workhorses of winter, so it's wise to ensure your home sweet home is safe.

Fire is the biggest threat year-round. Last year, firefighters responded to residential fires every 79 seconds. The blazes injured more than 14,000 people and caused more than \$6 billion in property damage.

To cut the risk of fire, Lyle Neigh, a retired volunteer fire inspector for the Ithaca Fire Department, urges folks to use their heads.

"People should be extremely careful with heaters. Don't pile stuff on top of your register, get rid of scrap paper, and be extremely careful with smoking materials."

Neigh recommends residents using holiday lights inspect them before putting them in, on or around their homes.

"Make sure the lights are UL, that's Underwriters Laboratories, inspected and that's usually somewhere on the lights," Neigh said. "If you don't know yourself, have someone else inspect them for you. When they're up, inspect them again. The condition of lights can change from year to year."

Fires can't always be prevented, but experts said lives and property can be saved through routine maintenance and the use of relatively inexpensive devices. Properly outfitting a two-story house with smoke alarms, fire extinguishers, escape ladders and carbon monoxide detectors costs about \$300. Cost of protecting your family? Priceless.

According to safety experts from Consumer Reports, Underwriters Laboratories, the National Fire Protection Association and other agencies, here are 10 tips for a safer holiday:

- 1. Countertop appliances can be surprisingly hazardous. If cords are allowed to

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hang or tangle, blenders, toasters and such can be pulled off a counter and, in the case of deep-fat fryers, cause serious injury.

- 2. Irons not only cause fires, they cause injuries.

"Irons are a heavy appliance and most household incidents occur when they fall on people -- children more often than not," says John Drengenberg of Underwriters Laboratories. "They should be unplugged and put away when not in use."

- 3. Space heaters cause roughly 10 percent of residential fires.

"Give space heaters space," says Capt. Ronel Brown, spokesman for Louisville Fire and Rescue. "Make sure you place them at least 3 feet away from anything that can burn -- and never use them to dry damp clothes or anything else."

Because they use liquid fuel, kerosene space heaters can be especially dangerous. Never refuel a kerosene heater indoors or while it's hot.

- 4. Candles are increasingly popular, and candle-related fires have increased accordingly. Place candles at least 3 feet from anything flammable -- and well out of reach of pets and children. Never leave them unattended.

- 5. Fireplaces should be checked by a professional for cracks in the chimney flue and excessive buildup of creosote, a combustible waste product of wood fires. Never use paper or unseasoned wood in a fireplace.

- 6. Clothes dryers cause more fires than any other appliance or power tool, resulting in 10 deaths and \$84 million in property damage yearly. The main problem: Lint buildup in the exhaust hose causes the dryer to overheat.

Clean the lint trap after every load. Vacuum the exhaust hose once a year. If your hose is ribbed vinyl, replace it with aluminum pipe that won't kink or catch fire.

- 7. Smoke alarms cut your chance of dying in a house fire by half. Of the three types, only one detects both smoke and flames in a timely fashion.

Ionization alarms excel at detecting fast-flaming fires from paper or flammable liquids. Photoelectric alarms are best at detecting smoke, like that produced in slow-starting fires in bedding and upholstery. Consumer Reports recommends hybrid units with both technologies, such as the First Alert Dual Sensor SA302 (about \$30).

Install one smoke alarm on each floor. Avoid placing them in corners or near windows, doors or air vents. Replace batteries once a year.

- 8. Escape ladders (\$27 to \$40) should be placed near a window of any bedroom above ground level.
- 9. Fire extinguishers (\$10 to \$20) are recommended for the kitchen, laundry room and garage. Make sure the extinguisher has an ABC rating, meaning it can fight fires caused by paper, wood, cloth, flammable liquids and electrical short circuits.
- 10. Carbon-monoxide detectors signal the presence of an invisible, odorless and tasteless gas that kills about 500 Americans a year. Consumer Reports recommends the Senco Model One, American Sensors CO910 and the Kidde Nighthawk Premium Plus (\$40 to \$50).

Lt. David Burbank, an IFD firefighter, said improper use of heating materials can increase carbon monoxide risks.

"During the colder months people sometimes use heating appliances in ways that

aren't appropriate which can cause carbon monoxide build up," Burbank said. Install detectors on each floor, preferably in or near bedrooms and away from windows and doors. Most units plug into wall outlets. Carbon monoxide detectors become less sensitive over time and should be replaced every five years.

Lastly, when prevention doesn't work and fire does happen, remember that local emergency relief resources are available.

"Our role is disaster response," said Michael Raffe, director of emergency services for the Tompkins County Chapter of the American Red Cross. "It may be just going to the house, checking to see if the victims have insurance or some place to go. It can go to the other extreme where they have no insurance. We help them gain access to resources."

Raffe said Red Cross members see a greater number of fires during the winter heating months and the beginning of air conditioning months. The Red Cross responds to an average of 27 to 43 incidents per year. By July 1, the group had responded to 13 fires in the area.

"The biggest bump for us is the end of October to the middle of November because that's the beginning of heating season.

Recovery and mitigation actions include victim advocacy, agency referrals, counseling and physical items such as comfort kits and teddy bears.

"We try to get to them right away and help them find some place to stay," Raffe said. "We'll pick up the slack and address the problems. If someone else comes in later, we'll back off."

Journal staff reporter Jody Roselle contributed to this report.



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