

Don't invite disaster to your holiday celebrations

Your guests have departed, the dishes are cleared away. Time to turn out the Christmas tree lights and go to bed. But have you forgotten something? What if one of your guests accidentally dropped a cigarette between the cushions on the couch, where it could smolder, undetected, for hours? The first you may know of it is when the smoke alarm shrieks its warning at 4:00 a.m. If you don't have a working smoke alarm, you may not wake up at all.

According to statistics from the Ontario Fire Marshal's Office, the number of fires and fire deaths typically rises sharply during the holiday season. Gatherings of family and friends can mean an increase in cooking activity, which is the leading cause of home fires. Alcohol consumption also tends to increase this time of year and is cited as a contributing factor in many of Ontario's fire deaths. Add candles, holiday decorations and heating equipment to the mix and the potential for disaster is great.

Since 1980, the fire death rate in Ontario has dropped by more than 60%. However, with 18 fire fatalities last December—almost twice the monthly average—the holiday season remains a perilous time of year. You can protect your home and your family from fire with these simple, common sense safety tips from the Ontario Fire Marshal's Office.

Cooking: Look while you cook—unattended cooking is the leading cause of kitchen fires. Wear tight-fitting or rolled-up sleeves when cooking and keep all combustible materials a safe distance from the stove.

Alcohol: Cooking or smoking while under the influence of alcohol can be deadly. Keep a close eye on any drinkers in your household and make sure all cigarettes are properly extinguished and the stove is off before going to bed.

Candles: Keep candles in a sturdy holder away from children, pets and combustible materials. Snuff them out before leaving the room.

Christmas trees: Buy a fresh tree and keep the base of the trunk in water at all times. Discard any broken or frayed sets of lights. Lit candles should *never* be placed on or near the Christmas tree. When the tree starts to dry out, it's time to throw it away.

Space heaters: Keep portable heaters at least one metre away from anything that can burn—including you. Don't use your heaters to dry shoes or clothes.

Heating appliances: Remember to have your furnace inspected each year by a licensed technician. Your chimney should also be cleaned and inspected annually to prevent problems that may cause a build-up of carbon monoxide. A carbon monoxide alarm will alert you to the presence of this deadly gas.

Smoke alarms: It is the law in Ontario to have working smoke alarms. The fire service recommends you install one on every level of your home and outside all sleeping areas. Test your alarms regularly and change the batteries at least once a year.

Home Escape Plan: If a fire does occur in your home, everyone must get out as quickly as possible. Develop a fire escape plan and practice it with your entire family.

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