

Heating Equipment And Carbon Monoxide Safety Are Key To Staying Warm And Safe This Winter

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SPRINGFIELD - Cold winter winds continue to bring a chill to the state meaning many Illinoisans will be turning up their thermostats to stay warm for the rest of the winter season. This also brings an increased risk for home fires and carbon monoxide incidents. Unlike smoke, carbon monoxide is a colorless and odorless gas only detectable by special devices and CO alarms. The Office of the State Fire Marshal encourages residents to have their furnaces checked, change furnace filters and to make sure carbon monoxide (CO) and smoke detectors are functioning properly.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), heating is the second leading cause of home fires and home fire injuries, and the third leading cause of home fire deaths. Local fire departments across the country responded to an estimated average of 48,530 fires involving heating equipment per year in 2014-2018, accounting for 14% of all reported home fires during this time. These fires resulted in annual losses of 500 civilian deaths, 1,350 civilian injuries, and \$1.1 billion in direct property damage. Most home heating fire deaths (81%) involved stationary or portable space heaters. The leading factor contributing to home heating fires (25%) was failure to clean, principally from solid-fueled heating equipment, primarily chimneys. Half of the home heating fire deaths were caused by having heating equipment to close too things that can burn, such as upholstered furniture, clothing mattresses or bedding. Nearly half of all home heating fires occurred in December, January and February.

“It’s very important that you are testing your smoke and CO alarms monthly and replacing broken or expired alarms. Since carbon monoxide is a colorless and odorless gas, it’s vitally important that you have working alarms in your home, as they could save your life,” said Illinois State Fire Marshal Matt Perez. “There are numerous brands of CO alarms available at most retailers across the state, some that are a combination CO /Smoke alarm that can provide dual protection.”

In 2020 according to National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), Illinois Fire Departments responded to 23,027 calls about carbon monoxide and were able to determine a CO leak at 10,528 of those locations.

Symptoms of CO poisoning are very similar to the flu and include headache, fatigue, shortness of breath, nausea and dizziness. Other signs of possible CO presence include condensation on walls and windows, house pets becoming sluggish and chronic odors from malfunctioning appliances. If you suspect you may be experiencing these symptoms, smell natural gas leaking in your home, or if your CO alarm activates, if you can evacuate the building, do so immediately. Only open windows on your way out if they are easily accessible. If someone is unable to leave the building, or is unconscious, open doors and windows to the outside in the area the person is located and stay as near to the open window or door as possible until first responders arrive. Close any doors that open to other areas of the building to isolate the room the person is in. Turn on any exhaust fans that may be present. Once you evacuate, then call 9-1-1 from outside your home or a neighbor’s house.

Space heaters lead to countless fires due to improper use during the winter months. It’s important to plug space heaters directly into wall outlets and not extension cords. Keep space heaters at least three feet from curtains, clothing, furniture or bedding. Purchase units with an automatic shutoff in case the unit tips over or you forget to shut it off.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when it comes to winter heating safety:

- Have heating equipment and chimneys cleaned and inspected every year by a qualified professional; change furnace filters frequently.
- Have a qualified professional install stationary space heating equipment, water heaters or central heating equipment according to the local codes and manufacturers' instructions.
- Keep interior and exterior air vents clear of blockages or obstructions.
- Keep anything that can burn at least three feet away from heating equipment, like a furnace, fireplace, wood stove, or portable space heater.
- Make sure the fireplace has a sturdy screen to stop sparks from flying into the room. Ashes should be cool before being placed into a metal container. Keep the container a safe distance away from your home.
- Create a three-foot "kid-free zone" around open fires and space heaters.
- Test smoke and CO alarms at least once a month and be familiar with the sounds they make.
- Never use an oven or range to heat your home.
- Remember to turn off portable or space heaters when leaving the room or going to bed.
- Install carbon monoxide and smoke detectors on each floor of your home and within 15 feet of each sleeping area.
- CO detectors have a limited life span, check the manufacturer's instructions for information on replacement.