

Staying Warm And Safe This Winter Starts With Heating Equipment And Carbon Monoxide Safety

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SPRINGFIELD - Illinoisans will be turning up their thermostats to stay warm for the rest of the winter season, which 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 (OSFM) encourages residents to have their furnaces checked, change furnace filters, and 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 too close to 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.

“Carbon Dioxide is a colorless and odorless gas, so it’s very important to have working alarms in your home, which could save your life,” said Acting Illinois State Fire Marshal Dale Simpson. “Retailers across the state sell numerous brands of alarms, with some being a combination CO/smoke alarms, that provide dual protection. It’s also important to check and test these alarms monthly and replace any broken or expired alarms with sealed 10-year battery alarms.”

In 2021 according to National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), Illinois Fire Departments responded to 19,859 calls about carbon monoxide and were able to determine a CO leak at 9,478 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. Turn on any exhaust fans that may be present. Once you evacuate, 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 other 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, and 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.