

Winter Holiday Fire Safety

Are you ready for a safe holiday?



Office of the Fire Commissioner

Public Safety Division

Alberta Municipal Affairs

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Winter Holiday Fire Statistics

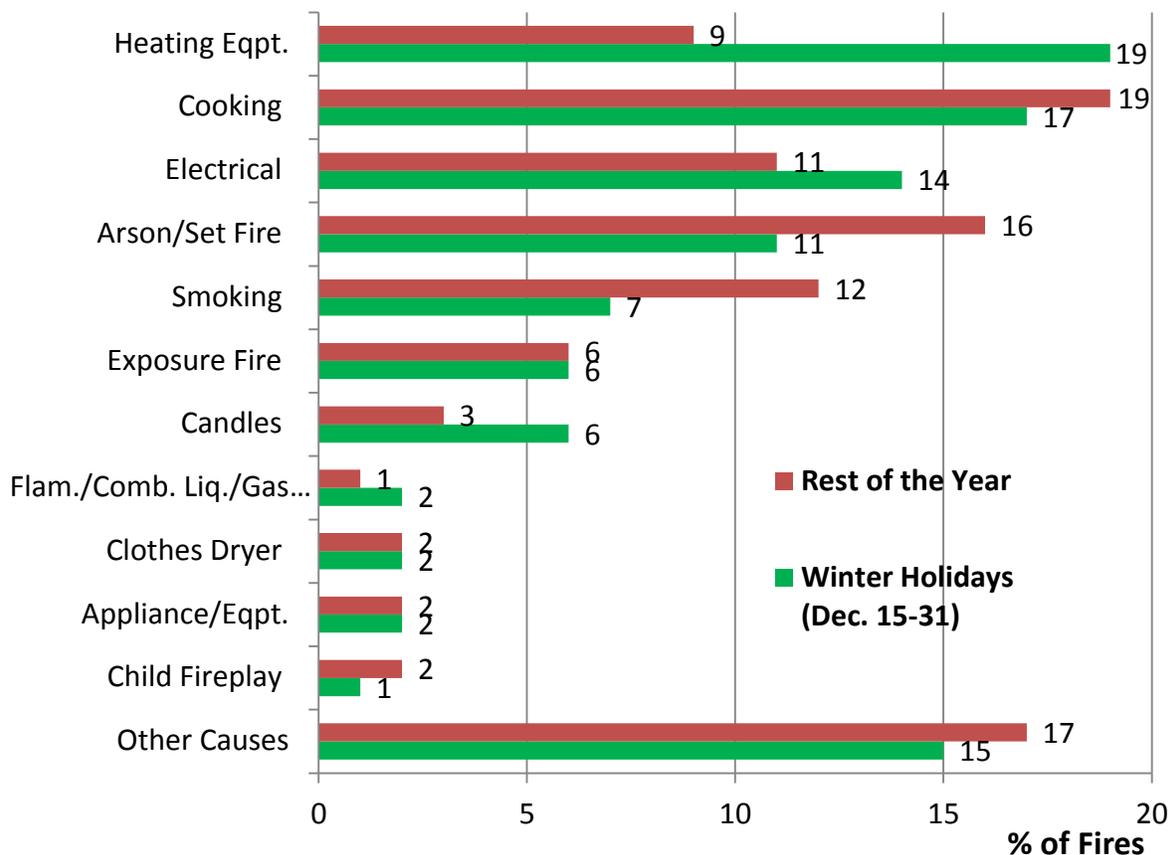
Statistics continue to show that during the winter holiday season, fire-related deaths in Alberta homes **double** compared to the rest of the year.

The chart below contrasts the causes of home fires in Alberta during the winter holiday season with those during the rest of the year. While the main causes of fire are similar throughout the year, there are increases in fires caused by heating, electrical and candles during the holiday season.

Contrary to popular belief, Christmas tree fires are rare, indicating Albertans are practicing fire safety with Christmas trees.

Keep fire safety in mind this holiday season. Are you ready for a safe holiday?

Home Fire Causes: Winter Holidays Versus Rest of the Year



12 Holiday Safety Tips

- 1. Water fresh trees daily.** It's time to trim that Christmas tree, and if you're using a real tree, buy a fresh tree and keep the base of the trunk in water at all times. Keep your tree away from any ignition source such as the fireplace, heaters or candles.
- 2. Check all sets of lights before decorating.** Before you put those lights on the tree or around the front window, check the cords closely. Discard any sets that are frayed or damaged.
- 3. Make sure you have working smoke alarms.** With family and friends spending extra time at your home over the holidays, it's a great time to check your smoke alarms. Replace smoke alarms if they are over 10 years old. Remember that you need working smoke alarms on every storey of your home and outside all sleeping areas. Test your alarms to make sure they will alert you and your family if a fire occurs, giving you the precious seconds you need to safely escape.
- 4. Make sure you have working carbon monoxide alarms.** Carbon monoxide is an invisible, odourless gas that can quickly kill you. Replace any carbon monoxide alarms over seven years old. Installing carbon monoxide alarms in your home will alert you to the presence of this deadly gas.
- 5. Make sure everyone knows how to get out safely if a fire occurs.** Develop and practice a home fire escape plan with all members of the household and make sure someone helps young children, older adults or anyone else that may need assistance to evacuate. Once outside, stay outside and call 911 from a cell phone or neighbour's house.
- 6. Use extension cords wisely.** People often use extension cords for that extra set of lights or the dancing Santa in the corner. Extension cords should be used only as a temporary connection. Make sure cords never go under rugs as this can cause damage to the cord and cause a fire.
- 7. Give space heaters space.** If you are using space heaters to help take the chill off, remember to keep them at least one metre (3 feet) away from anything that can burn, such as curtains, upholstery or holiday decorations.
- 8. When you go out, blow out!** Candles are often part of our holiday traditions, but remember to always blow out candles before leaving the room or going to bed. Keep lit candles safely away from children and pets and anything that can burn, such as curtains, upholstery or holiday decorations.
- 9. Keep matches and lighters out of the sight and reach of children.** People often keep matches and lighters handy to light holiday candles, but matches and lighters can be deadly in the hands of children. If you smoke, have only one lighter or book of matches and keep them with you at all times.
- 10. Watch what you heat!** The holiday season is one of the busiest times of the year, which means it's easy to get distracted from what we are doing. Cooking fires most commonly occur when cooking is left unattended. Always stay in the kitchen when cooking – especially if using oil or high temperatures. If a pot catches fire, carefully slide a tight-fitting lid over the pot to smother the flames and then turn off the heat.
- 11. Encourage smokers to smoke outside.** Careless smoking is the leading cause of fatal fires. If you do allow smoking indoors, use large, deep ashtrays that can't be knocked over and make sure cigarette butts are properly extinguished.
- 12. Stay safe during social gatherings.** With all the festive cheer this time of year, keep a close eye on anyone attempting to cook or smoke while under the influence of alcohol. Social occasions coupled with alcohol consumption, cooking, smoking or unattended candles can create a fire risk. To minimize the risk at parties, plan your event in advance so you have enough time to prepare the meal. Hurried cooking activities, multi-tasking and neglecting fire safety can be ingredients for an unwanted house fire. Avoid over-crowding. Encourage guests to smoke outside and provide them with a safe ashtray. Refrain from burning candles during parties, as they can easily be accidentally knocked over or ignite nearby combustibles.

Christmas Tree Safety

Special fire safety precautions need to be taken when keeping a live tree in the house. A burning tree can rapidly fill a room with fire and deadly gases.

Watch a video of a real-time Christmas tree fire at:
www.aema.alberta.ca/documents/Scotch_pine_tree_fire.mpeg



- Get a freshly cut tree. It will stay green longer and be less of a fire hazard. Try to pick a tree with a strong green colour and a noticeable fragrance.
- Always test for freshness before buying. A tree with a high moisture content is safer. Very few needles should fall when the butt of the tree is tapped on the ground; needles should bend, not break; and the trunk should be sticky with resin to the touch.
- Cut the bottom of the tree two to four centimeters diagonally to help it absorb water.
- Place the tree in a stand that will hold two to three litres of water and top it up daily. Check the water level daily to ensure the tree is always immersed in water. If the water level drops below the trunk, the stem may reseal itself, requiring a fresh cut.
- To clean the tree stand and improve the tree's water intake, use one capful of bleach to one cup of water.
- Use a tree stand that has widespread legs for better balance.
- Shorts in electrical lights or open flames from candles, lighters or matches can start tree fires.
- Place your tree away from heat sources such as a fireplace, television, a sunny window or heat vent. The heat will dry out the tree causing it to be more easily ignited by heat, flame or sparks.
- The tree should not block doors or windows.
- Never use candles on the tree.
- A live tree can be used for a period of two weeks. After that, even the freshest tree can start to dry out.
- When the tree becomes dry, discard it promptly. The best way to dispose of your tree is by taking it to a recycling centre or having it hauled away by a community pick-up service.
- Never put tree branches or needles in a fireplace or wood-burning stove.
- Do not go near a Christmas tree with an open flame.
- Consider an artificial tree (they are much safer and cleaner). If you are using a metallic or artificial tree, make sure it is flame retardant.

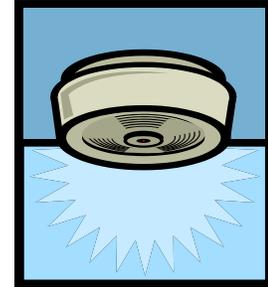
Holiday Lights Safety

- Use approved light sets that bear an approval marking authorized by the certification organization such as CSA, ULC, cUL, etc., which are recognized by the Province of Alberta.
- Use the proper lights for the environment. Indoor lights should not be used outdoors because they lack weatherproof connections. Some outdoor lights burn too hot for indoors.
- Inspect light strings before use. Check for cracked bulbs and for frayed, broken or exposed wires and discard if faulty.
- Do not use electric light strings on metallic trees. A faulty system could energize the tree and shock or electrocute anyone coming into contact. Illuminate metallic trees with coloured floodlights placed at a safe distance from the tree.
- Link a maximum of three light strands together.
- Periodically check the light string wires; they should not be warm to the touch.
- Before replacing a bulb on your light strings, check the original package to verify proper wattage and voltage.
- Make sure outdoor circuits are equipped with an approved, weatherproof ground fault circuit interrupter.
- Ensure the circuit breakers and fuses on your holiday lights circuit are no larger than 15 amperes.
- Don't overload circuits. Have no more than 1400 watts on a circuit. If other lights in the house dim when the holiday lighting is turned on or the plug is very hot when unplugged, your circuit is overloaded.
- To figure out a circuit's load, multiply the number of bulbs by the watts per bulb, and add any lamps, appliances or other equipment on the same circuit.
- LED (light-emitting diode) strings are available for sale through many Canadian retailers. These energy-efficient light strings produce very little heat and reduce the risk of fire. There is still, however, the potential for shock or fire hazard as with any other electrical device.
- LED lights should have an approval label attached to the light string such as a red tag stating an approval file number.
- Turn off all tree and display lights before retiring for the night or before leaving the house.



Smoke Alarms

Smoke alarms provide early warning of smoke and fire danger to allow safe escape from fires. Follow these tips to ensure your smoke alarms are in working order:



- Smoke alarms must have a source of electricity either from household current or from a battery. Batteries should never be removed for other uses or to stop false alarms.
- Smoke alarms can fail with age. To make sure that they are in working condition, they must be tested every month by pushing the test button. Replace smoke alarms if they are over 10 years old.
- At least one smoke alarm must be installed on every level of a home and outside sleeping areas. Most fire deaths happen during sleeping hours and a smoke alarm outside the bedrooms can alert you to escape. A smoke alarm inside the bedroom will provide additional protection.

Carbon Monoxide Safety

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colourless, odourless, poisonous gas found in fumes from car exhaust, furnaces, water heaters, fireplaces, and appliances or equipment that burn solid (wood, charcoal), liquid (gasoline, oil) or gaseous (propane, natural gas) fuels. No fuel burns 100 percent. It is the incomplete burning of fuels that produces carbon monoxide.

Fumes from properly installed and maintained appliances are usually safely vented outside. However, if venting is disrupted (e.g., bird's nest in chimney) or fumes enter a home (e.g., from a car left running in an attached garage), carbon monoxide can collect inside a home and quickly reach dangerous levels.

Carbon monoxide has a greater affinity than oxygen for hemoglobin in red blood cells that carries oxygen to various parts of the body. When the carbon monoxide level exceeds a certain limit, it can replace oxygen in the blood and become poisonous. Initial symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include flu-like symptoms such as headache, running nose and sore eyes, etc., without the fever. At higher exposure levels, one may experience drowsiness, dizziness, vomiting, and a sense of disorientation and confusion. These symptoms make it difficult for victims to make rational decisions such as leaving the home or calling for assistance. At extreme exposure levels, a victim can be rendered unconscious. The gas can cause brain damage or even death.

Ensure that carbon monoxide never has an opportunity to enter your home. Install at least one carbon monoxide detector in your home. If your detector sounds and you have an obvious source of carbon monoxide, evacuate the house, including pets. If anyone is suffering from flu-like symptoms, call 911. You can also remove or turn off the carbon monoxide source and ventilate the house. Reset the alarm and re-occupy the house only after the alarm ceases.

For more information, visit: www.ofc.alberta.ca/ofc-carbon-monoxide-awareness-week.cfm.

Fire Escape Planning

When the smoke alarm sounds, everyone must know what to do and where to go. Develop a fire escape plan, keeping the following in mind:

- Know two ways out of every room. The first way out would be the door, while the alternate escape could be a window that can be exited safely.
- Make sure all designated escape routes are accessible and free of clutter.
- Leave the building as quickly as possible. Once outside, don't re-enter the building for any reason.
- Call 9-1-1 from outside the building using a cell phone or a neighbour's phone.

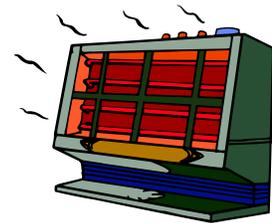
Extension Cord Safety

Use extension cords wisely. People often use extension cords for that extra set of lights or the dancing Santa in the corner. Extension cords should be used only as a temporary connection. Make sure cords never go under rugs as this can cause damage to the cord and cause a fire.

Space Heater Safety

The central heating system in homes is often supplemented with space heaters. To prevent heating fires:

- Keep the space heater at least one metre (3 feet) away from combustibles such as paper, bedding, furniture, curtains and holiday decorations.
- Turn off the space heater before going out or going to bed.



Candle Safety

- Never leave burning candles unattended.
- Place candles away from absolutely anything that could catch fire.
- Use tea lights or votive candles in non-combustible containers as they are generally safer than tapers.
- Burn candles only under the supervision of a responsible adult.
- Place candles where they will not be knocked down and put them into sturdy holders on a stable surface, well away from drafts, curtains, children and pets.
- Snuff out all candles before leaving the room or going to sleep.
- Never put lit candles on a tree.



Matches and Lighters

Keep matches and lighters out of the sight and reach of children. People often keep matches and lighters handy to light holiday candles, but matches and lighters can be deadly in the hands of children. If you smoke, have only one lighter or book of matches and keep them with you at all times.

Cooking Safety

Cooking is the number one cause of home fires in Alberta. Cooking oil and fat fires account for a large proportion of these fires. Be extra careful when cooking. The best way to fry foods is to use an electric-temperature-controlled skillet or a deep-fat fryer. Here's what to do if cooking oil or fat in a pot or pan catches fire:

- Turn off the heat immediately.
- Smother the flames by covering the pan with a lid.
- Use baking soda (flour can be explosive) on shallow grease fires.
- Never turn on the overhead fan, as this could spread the fire.
- Never throw water on a grease fire, as an explosive fireball could fill the kitchen.



A stovetop fire can start in a flash, so never leave stovetop cooking unattended. Keep all combustibles away from the stove. This includes tea towels, wooden or plastic spoons and paper towels.

Smoking

Smoking is a fire hazard and can be deadly. To prevent smoking fires:

- Encourage smokers to go outside.
- Never smoke in bed.
- Discourage smokers from discarding cigarette butts in planters, pots or dry leaves in the yard. Dry peat moss in pots can ignite and start a fire.
- Keep large, deep ashtrays on hand that will reduce the risk of ashes and cigarette butts falling onto rugs or upholstery.
- Allow ashes to cool completely before disposing.
- After parties, check around and under sofa and chair cushions for smoldering cigarettes.

Safe Social Gatherings

Social occasions coupled with alcohol consumption, cooking, smoking or unattended candles can create a fire risk. To minimize the risk at parties:

- Plan your event in advance so you have enough time to prepare the meal. Hurried cooking activities, multitasking and neglecting fire safety can be ingredients for an unwanted house fire.
- Avoid overcrowding.
- Encourage guests to smoke outside. Provide them with a safe ashtray.
- Refrain from burning candles during parties. They can easily be accidentally knocked over or ignite nearby combustibles.

Fireplace Safety

- Never burn gift wrapping, boxes, cartons, or other types of packaging in the fireplace. They burn too rapidly and generate far too much heat.
- Don't hang Christmas stockings from the mantel when the fireplace is in use.
- Always use a screen in front of the fireplace to protect against flying sparks.
- Never use gasoline or any other flammable liquids to start a fire.
- Use only small quantities of seasoned and dried wood.
- Never leave the fire unattended or let it smolder.
- Remove ashes regularly.
- Place the ashes in a metal container and store outside away from flammable materials.
- Don't use Christmas trees for firewood.



Electrical Outlets

There is often a tendency to overload wall outlets during the holiday season and it is a fire hazard. Overloading electrical outlets is unsafe and should be avoided even for short durations.

- Inspect all cords before using; make sure they are CSA certified. Read the labels and manufacturer's instructions to ensure proper use.
- Look for loose connections or frayed or exposed wire. Discard any defective cords.
- Insert plugs fully into outlets. Poor contact may cause overheating or shock.
- Do not coil or bunch an extension cord which is in use and do not run it under carpets or rugs.
- Never use indoor extension cords outside.
- Keep outdoor electrical connectors above ground and out of puddles and snow.
- Be careful when placing cords behind or beneath furniture; pinched cords can cause them to fray and even short out.

Decorations

- Choose decorations that are flame-retardant, non-combustible and non-conductive.
- If there are young children or pets in your home, avoid very small decorations.
- Do not use metallic ornaments on the tree. If they make contact with defective wiring they could become a shock hazard.
- Recycle wrapping paper and never put wrapping paper in a fireplace.



Power Outages

Safety issues can arise during an extended power outage. Please follow the tips below to ensure safety while the utility service is being restored.

- Use battery powered flashlights or lanterns. This will greatly reduce your risk of a home fire while you are without power. Using candles for emergency lighting can be hazardous. Many fires have started from safety lapses while using candles.
- Many homeowners have smoke alarms powered by household electricity. During power outages, make sure that you have a working battery powered smoke alarm to protect your family. Smoke alarms provide your family with the critical early warning to escape a home fire.
- If you are using a generator as a backup power source, always place the generator outside. If the generator is inside your home, fatal levels of carbon monoxide exhaust could accumulate and endanger your family.

Fire Safe Gift Suggestions

- Home smoke alarm
- Battery-powered fire-safe candles
- Carbon monoxide detector
- Multi-purpose (ABC) fire extinguisher
- Thermostatically controlled deep-fryer or skillet
- First-aid kit
- Flashlight and batteries
- Fire escape ladders for second-floor bedrooms
- Window guards, especially good for people living in high-rise apartments
- Child locks, baby gates and outlet covers
- Night lights
- Candle snuffer
- Emergency kit with things like energy bars, water, battery radio, flashlight and a first-aid kit packed in a small travel bag.



Other Sources of Information

Three-minute drill campaign

Visit www.3minutedrill.alberta.ca, a unique Alberta made interactive website, where you can learn fire prevention and safety.

Contact us!

For more information on winter holiday fire safety, contact the Office of the Fire Commissioner at 780-415-0546. Outside Edmonton, call toll-free within Alberta by dialing 310-0000. Email the OFC at: firecomm@gov.ab.ca.