Home Holiday Safety Checklist

Each year as the holiday season approaches we are more inclined to think about decorating our homes, purchasing gifts and entertaining friends and family. Electrical holiday safety is the last thing on our minds, however, the Electrical Safety Foundation International urges consumers to take precaution this holiday season while decorating their home. Many potential hazards are easily identified and corrected. Use this safety checklist to eliminate potential hazards.

CHRISTMAS TREES:

- BEFORE purchasing a live tree, check for freshness to minimize fire hazard of dry needles.
- BEFORE mounting a tree in the house, cut base so it can absorb water, at least 1 gallon a day.
- Place tree away from fireplaces and other heat sources. Don't use electrical ornaments or light strings on artificial tress with metallic leaves or branch coverings. This could create an electrical shock.
- Whether artificial or freshly cut, a tree should be kept at least 3 feet from all sources of heat.
- It is important to make sure the tree doesn't block any exists.
- If you are using a metallic or artificial tree, make sure it is flame retardant. Although this label does not mean the tree won't catch fire, it does indicate the tree will resist burning and should extinguish quickly.
- Do not use electrical lights on a metal tree.

CHILDREN:

- When visiting other people's homes, remember that their homes may not be child-proofed. When arriving, look around to make sure that there are no obvious hazards to your child.
- When buying presents for children, avoid those that could be highly flammable. Make sure all electric toys bear a fire safety label from an independent testing laboratory.
- To prevent both burns and electrical shocks, don't give young children (under age ten) a toy that must be plugged into an electrical outlet. Instead, buy toys that are battery-operated.
- Plan for safety. Remember, there is no substitute for common sense. Look for and eliminate potential danger spots near candles, fireplace, trees and/or electrical connections. Lights hung or strung across a wall or window may be low enough for a small child to grab.

DECORATIONS:

- Carefully inspect each electrical decoration. Cracked or frayed sockets, loose or bare wires and loose connections may cause a serious shock or start a fire.
- Follow the use and care instructions that accompany your electrical decorations.
- Choose holiday decorations made with flame-resistant, flame-retardant or non-combustible materials, whenever possible.

Lighting

- Use lights that are approved by an independent testing laboratory, such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL). The UL Mark means that UL engineers have tested samples of the product for foreseeable safety hazards such as fire and electric shock.
- Don't staple or nail through light strings or electrical/extension cords-you could damage the wire or insulation, which could lead to an electrical shock or fire.
- Before using any light strings, animated displays or other electrical products outdoors, make sure the product is approved by a nationally recognized certification organization and marked "for outdoor use."
- Check packaging to determine the maximum number of strings that may be linked together.
- When replacing a light bulb, make sure that the replacement bulb is of equal or lesser wattage than that recommended by the manufacturer.
- It is important to turn off all electrical light strings, candles and decorations before leaving home or going to bed. Automatic lighting timers can be used to ensure that lights are not left on. These are available for both indoor and outdoor applications.
- Use a dry, wooden ladder when hanging holiday lights, to reduce the chance of an electrical shock. Be sure to stay clear of overhead electrical wires.

- Waterproof all electrical connections and keep them elevated so that water won't drain into the connection and possibly cause a shock or short circuit.
- For added electric shock protection, plug outdoor electric lights and decorations into circuits protected by ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs). Portable outdoor GFCIs can be purchased where electrical supplies are sold. GFCIs can be installed permanently to household circuits by a qualified electrician.
- Fasten outdoor lights securely to trees, house walls, or other firm supports to protect the lights from wind damage. To hold light strings in place, use only insulated staples (not nails or tacks) that are hammered in. Using a staple gun increases the chance of electrical shock. Or, run strings of lights through hooks (available at hardware stores).
- Never use electric lights on a metallic tree. The tree can become charged with electricity from faulty lights, and a person touching a branch could be shocked.

Candles

- NEVER burn candles near evergreens. Burning evergreens in the fireplace can also be hazardous.
- Place lighted candles away from combustible material or where they could be knocked over.
- Do not use a candle to check the pilot light on a stove, or to examine kerosene heaters or lanterns.

Extension Cords

- Do not overload extension cords or allow them to run through water or snow on the ground.
- Do not substitute extension cords for permanent wiring.
- Do not run through walls, doorways, ceilings or floors. If cord is covered, heat cannot escape, which may result in a fire hazard.
- Do not use an extension cord for more than one appliance.
- A heavy reliance on extension cords is an indication that you have too few outlets to address your needs. Have additional outlets installed where you need them.
- Multiple plug outlets must be plugged directly into mounted electrical receptacles. They cannot be chained together.
- Make sure the extension cord or temporary power strip you use is rated for the products to be plugged in and is marked for either indoor or outdoor use.
- The appliance or tool that you are using the cord with will have a wattage rating on it. Match this up with your extension cord. Do not use a cord that has a lower rating.
- Replace No. 18 gauge cords with No. 16 gauge cords. Older extension cords using small (No. 18 gauge) wires will overheat at 15 amps or 20 amps.
- Never use a cord that feels hot or is damaged in any way. Touching even a single exposed strand can give you an electric shock or burn.
- Never use three-prong plugs with outlets that only have two slots for the plug. Don't cut off the ground pin to force a fit. This defeats the purpose of a three-prong plug and could lead to an electrical shock. Also, never force a plug into an outlet if it doesn't fit.
- Change the cord to a higher rated one or unplug some appliances, if the rating on the cord is exceeded because of the power requirements of one or more appliances being used on the cord.
- Use cords with polarized and/or three-prong plugs
- Buy only cords approved by an independent testing laboratory, such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL), ETL-SEMKO (ETL) or Canadian Standards Association (CSA).
- A ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) can be plugged or installed into an outlet to protect against electrical shock. GFCIs are products designed to prevent serious injury or death from electrical shock by detecting ground faults at very low levels.

FIRES:

- The year end holiday season is a prime time for residential fires. Decorative lights, candles, parties where people drink and smoke all increase the likelihood of fire. It's important that your home is ready for the increased energy use.
- Be sure all family members know and practice **f**ire **e**xit **d**rills **i**n **t**he **h**ome.
- Use portable fire extinguishers for putting out small fires or containing them until firefighters arrive.
- Be sure chimney and fireplaces have been inspected and cleaned.
- Keep matches and lighters out of children's reach.
- Maintain holiday lights. Avoid overloading electrical outlets.

- Do not leave a stove unattended.
- Use only nonflammable decorations that are placed away from heat vents and if using an artifical tree, make sure it's flame retardant.
- Avoid using candles.
- Select a fresh Christmas tree and keep it in water at all times; needles on fresh trees should be green and should not fall off easily.

Kitchen Fires

- Unattended cooking is the leading cause of home fires in the U.S. When cooking for holiday visitors, remember to keep an eye on what you are doing.
- Know the location, type and purpose of your fire extinguisher.
- Never leave a child alone when cooking or when an electrical appliance is within reach.

GENERATORS and CARBON MONOXIDE SAFETY:

- Check smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors monthly.
- Do not connect generators directly to household wiring without an appropriate transfer switch installed. Power from generators connected directly to household wiring can backfeed along power lines and electrocute anyone coming in contact with them, including lineworkers making repairs.
- Make sure your generator is properly grounded.
- Keep the generator dry.
- Make sure extension cords used with generators are rated for the load, and are free of cuts, worn insulation, and have three-pronged plugs.
- Do not overload the generator. A portable generator should be used only when necessary, and only to power essential equipment or appliances.
- Never operate the generator in enclosed or partially enclosed spaces. Use carbon monoxide detectors in nearby enclosed spaces to monitor levels. Generators can produce high levels of carbon monoxide very quickly, which can be deadly.
- Use a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) to help prevent electrocutions and electrical shock injuries.
- Make sure fuel for the generator is stored safely, away from living areas, in properly labeled containers, and away from fuel-burning appliances. Before re-fueling, always turn the generator off and let it cool down.
- Turn off all appliances powered by the generator before shutting down the generator.
- Keep children away from portable generators at all times.

GROUND FAULT CIRCUIT INTERRUPTERS (GFCIs)

- GFCIs are products designed to prevent serious injury or death from electrical shock by detecting ground faults at very low levels.
- A GFCI should be used in any area where water may come in contact with electrical products. GFCIs are now required by code in certain areas of the home, including unfinished basements, kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms, garages, crawl spaces and around swimming pools.
- If a GFCI senses minimal current leakage to ground in an electrical circuit, it assumes a ground fault has occurred. It them interrupts power fast enough to prevent serious injury from electrical shock.
- Three types of GFCIs are designed for home use-wall receptacle, circuit breaker and portable plug-in. All three are readily available, inexpensive and fairly simple to install.

LADDER SAFETY:

- Inspect ladders for loose or missing screws, hinges, bolts and nuts.
- Use the right height ladder; ensuring ladders extend at least three feet past the edge of the roof.
- Use wooden or fiberglass ladders when near electrical wiring. Metal ladders conduct electricity.

SPACE HEATERS:

- Plug portable space heaters directly into an outlet; do not use an extension cord.
- Make certain the circuit into which you plug a space heater can adequately and safely handle the added demand.
- Never remove the grounding feature on a plug by clipping or grinding off the third prong.
- Use an adapter to connect the heater's 3-prong plug, if you do not have a 3-hole outlet. Make sure the adapter ground wire or tab is attached to the outlet ground.

- Relocate heaters away from passageways and keep all flammable materials such as curtain, rugs, furniture or newspaper at least three feet away.
- Read the manufacturer's instruction manual before using any space heater. Check to make sure the heater bears the mark of a certified testing organization.
- Keep space heaters at least 3 ft. away from any combustible materials such as bedding, clothing, draperies, furniture and rugs.
- Keep space heaters away from areas with water. Check your manual to be sure the heater is intended to be used in locations such as bathrooms.
- Don't use space heaters in rooms where children are unsupervised. Children may stick their fingers or other objects through the protective guards, causing burns or shock.
- Portable heaters have hot parts that can cause sparking. Do not use them in areas where flammable liquids such as gasoline or kerosene are used or stored.
- Space heaters are meant to supply supplemental heat. Do not use them to warm bedding, cook food, dry clothing or thaw pipes.
- Unplug and safely store portable space heaters when not in use.

SMOKE DETECTORS:

- Test all smoke detectors at least once a month by pushing and holding the test button.
- When you change your clocks in the spring and fall you should also replace the batteries in all of your smoke detectors.
- If your smoke detectors are older than 10 years, you need to replace them.
- Smoke alarms should be installed outside each separate sleeping area and on each level of your house.
- Smoke detectors should be placed on the ceiling at least 4 inches from the nearest wall or high on a wall 4 to 12 inches from the ceiling.

POST HOLIDAY SAFETY:

- Use the gripping area of the plug when unplugging lights and appliances. Yanking or tugging on the cord could damage the wires and insulation, possibly leading to an electrical shock or fire.
- Separate outdoor from indoor decorations. Label them accordingly.
- Discard broken or faulty lights.
- Store decorations away from children, pets and water.
- Make sure all electrical lights, toys and appliances bear the seal of a nationally recognized certification agency, such as CSA, Intertek Testing Services or Underwriters Laboratories.
- Don't allow your children to use electrical toys near water and make sure they know what water and electricity never mix. Electrical toys can become a shock hazard if they are misused.
- Send warranty and product registration forms to manufactures. That way, they can notify you promptly in case of a recall.
- Post-holiday sales are a great time to purchase fire extinguishers and smoke detectors.