



Graham Fire & Rescue

HOME HEATING

December through February are the leading months for home fires and home fire deaths. More than one-third of home fire deaths in the U.S. occur during the winter months. Heating equipment fires are the second leading cause of fire deaths in American homes and the biggest fire culprit December through January. An estimated 73,800 home heating fires in 1994 killed 487 people and injured just under 2,000 people. Taking simple safety precautions could prevent most U.S. home fires caused by heating equipment.

The home heating fire problem in America is largely one of human error, particularly with the misuse of portable heaters, fireplaces and woodstoves. The critical elements of home heating safety encompass correct installation, maintenance, fueling and operation of portable and space heaters, as well as safely arranging household items around them. Major causes of U.S. home heating fires are: lack of regular cleaning of chimneys in fireplaces and woodstoves; placing things that can burn too close to space and portable heaters; flaws in design, installation or use; fueling errors involving liquid- or gas-fueled heaters; and leaving portable or space heaters unattended.

Tips for Preventing Heating Fires

Select equipment that bears the mark of an independent testing laboratory. Install and maintain heating equipment correctly, and be sure to comply with local fire and building codes. You can prevent a heating device fire simply by reading and following the manufacturer's instructions. This is especially important when you are using a new heater for the first time.

Portable and Other Space Heaters - Portable and space heaters can be either electric-powered or fueled by gas, liquid fuel (usually kerosene), or solid fuel (usually wood). All types must be kept at least 36 inches from anything that can burn, including furniture, bedding, clothing, pets and people. Space heaters must not be left operating when you are not in the room or when you go to sleep. Children and pets should be supervised at all times when space heaters are in use. Ensure everyone is aware of the high fire hazard associated with drying clothing or placing combustibles over heaters. If you have an electric space heater, check each season for fraying or splitting wires or overheating. Have all problems repaired by a professional before operating the space heater.

Portable Kerosene Heaters - If you have a liquid-fueled space heater, use only the fuel recommended by the manufacturer. Never use gasoline or any other substitute fuel, because the wrong fuel could burn hotter than the equipment's design limits and cause a serious fire. When refueling, always turn off the heater and let it cool down completely before adding fuel. Wipe up any spills promptly. If you are considering buying a kerosene heater, be sure to check to find out if it is legal in your community. Store the kerosene away from heat or open flame in a container approved by the local fire department, and be sure it is clearly marked with the fuel name. Kerosene heaters may give off harmful carbon-monoxide vapors and should not be used indoors.

Fireplaces - Have your chimney inspected by a professional prior to the start of every heating season and cleaned if necessary. Creosote a chemical substance that forms when wood burns, builds up in chimneys and can cause a chimney fire if not removed through cleaning. Always protect your home and your family by using a sturdy fireplace screen when burning fires. Remember to burn only wood - never burn paper or pine boughs, which can float out the chimney and ignite your roof or a neighboring home. Do not use flammable liquids in a fireplace. If you are purchasing a factory-built fireplace, select one listed by a testing laboratory, and have it installed according to local codes. If you decorate your fireplace with holiday stockings or other seasonal decorations, don't burn fires in it.

Wood Stoves - Be sure your wood stove bears the mark of an independent testing laboratory and meets local fire codes. Follow the manufacturer's recommendations for proper installation, use and maintenance. Chimney connections and chimney flues should be inspected at the beginning of each heating season and cleaned when necessary. Follow the same clearance rules for wood stoves as you would for space heaters. Burn only wood, and be sure the wood stove is placed on an approved stove board to protect the floor from heat and hot coals. Check with your local fire code officials before having your wood stove installed.

Portable LP Gas (Propane) Heaters with self-contained fuel supplies (cabinet heaters) are prohibited for home use by fire safety standards.