Be prepared

To Handle Holiday Lights Safely

Colored lights and Christmas trees are beautiful holiday decorations. Still, when they aren't used properly, they can cause fires, injuries and death.

Each year emergency rooms treat about 12,500 people for falls, cuts, shocks and burns due to incidents involving faulty holiday lights, dried-out Christmas trees and other seasonal ornaments. Christmas trees are involved in 300 fires annually.

Follow these tips to make your holiday a safe one.

Trees:

✔ Keep trees away from fireplaces and radiators.

✔ If you buy an artificial tree, look for the label "Fire Resistant."

✔ If you choose a live tree, check for freshness. A fresh tree is green; its needles are hard to pull from the branches and don't break when bent. The cut trunk of a fresh tree is sticky with resin.

✔ Fill a live tree's water stand every day.

✔ Dispose of a live tree when it begins dropping needles. Don't keep dried out trees in your home or garage; they're flammable. Never burn a tree in your fireplace; it can quickly blaze up.

✔ Use only flame-resistant materials to trim a tree.

✔ Never use lighted candles on a tree.

Indoor Lights:

✔ Use lights tested for safety by a recognized testing laboratory such as UL.

✔ Before hanging lights, check them for frayed wires, damaged sockets or cracked insulation. If you find defects, replace the entire set.

✔ Replace burned-out bulbs promptly. But if a bulb is burned out, leave it in until you have a replacement. A child could stick his finger in an empty socket.

✔ Keep extension cords and light strings away from the tree stand's water.

✔ Light your tree only when you're at home and awake. Keep a fire extinguisher handy, and check the batteries in your home's smoke detectors.

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✔ Periodically feel the lights' wires-they shouldn't be warm to the touch.

✔ Avoid covering lights with cloth or paper.

Outdoor Lights:

✔ Before using lights outside, make sure they're certified for outdoor use. All cords, plugs and sockets must be weatherproof.

✔ Keep electrical connections off the ground. Make sure the wiring is clear of metal drainpipes and railings. Use a ground fault circuit interrupter on each circuit.

✔ Don't overload your electrical circuits.

✔ Don't close doors or windows on extension cords, or mount lights in a way that can damage a cord's insulation.

✔ Stay away from power lines leading from utility poles.

✔ Fasten lights to trees, walls or other firm supports. Use insulated staples (not tacks or nails) to hold strings of lights in place, or run the strings through hooks.

✔ Turn off holiday lights when you go to bed or leave the house.