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State Fire Marshal Offers Holiday Related Safety Tips

With the holiday and winter season upon us, South Carolina State Fire Marshal Bert Polk is urging citizens to be fire safe.

Each year, statistics show that incidents of home fires and electrical accidents typically increase during the winter months. "In our state, during last year's winter months, there were 27 fires and 36 fire deaths," Polk said. "A third of the fatalities were related to heating."

Several safety steps can be taken to reduce the risks of death and injury from a home fire. Chief Polk offers these safety tips:

Holiday Cooking Safety

- **Cooking equipment** is the leading cause of reported home fires. Never leave cooking equipment unattended and make sure you turn off burners if you have to leave the kitchen. Supervise children closely in the kitchen. Wear short or close-fitting sleeves. Loose clothing can catch fire. To protect from spills and burns, use the back burners and turn the pot handles in, away from reaching hands. Unplug the toaster and other countertop appliances when not in use.
- Use **propane** and **charcoal grills** outdoors only. Place them away from the home, deck railings and out from under eaves and overhanging branches. Clean them often. Remove any grease or fat build-up from the grates and trays. Never leave grills unattended when in use.
- Turkeys must be completely thawed before placing in a **deep fryer**. A partially thawed turkey will cause oil to splatter, causing serious burns. Keep the fryer on flat ground at least 10 feet away from your home - including your garage. Use caution while touching the fryer as the lid and handle can become hot and cause burns. Never leave the fryer unattended when in use, and keep a fire extinguisher (multi-purpose, dry powder) ready at all times.

Holiday Decorating Safety

- When purchasing a **live Christmas tree**, check for freshness. A fresh tree will stay green longer and be less of a fire hazard than a dry tree. Cut one to two inches from the base of the trunk immediately before placing the tree in the stand and filling with water to ensure water absorption. Keep the stand filled with water by refilling daily. When decorating a tree, only use non-combustible or flame-resistant materials.

- When purchasing an **artificial Christmas tree**, look for the label “Fire Resistant.” Don’t use electrical ornaments or light strings on artificial trees with metallic leaves or branch coverings.
- Place your tree at least three feet away from all heat sources, including fireplaces, radiators, and space heaters.
- Plan your **electric light** displays accordingly. Before decorating, determine how many outlets are available and where they are located. Always purchase electrical decorations and lights from reputable retailers. Never connect more than three strands of incandescent lights together. Consider purchasing LED lights, which use less energy and run cooler than traditional incandescent lights. Carefully inspect each electrical decoration. Cracked or damaged sockets, loose or bare wires, and loose connections may cause a serious shock or start a fire. Avoid overloading electrical outlets with too many decorations or electrical devices. They can overheat and cause a fire. Make sure cords are not pinched in doors, windows, or under heavy furniture, which could damage the cord’s insulation. Turn off all indoor and outdoor electrical decorations before leaving home or going to sleep.
- **Candles** are an open flame. Keep all candles away from flammable items. Never use if oxygen is used in the home. Use sturdy candle holders and extinguish upon leaving a room or going to sleep. Have **flashlights** ready to use during a power outage.

Heating Safety

- **Space heaters** can be a convenient source of supplemental heat. However, they must be used properly and safely. Inspect the heater for cracked or broken plugs. If frayed, worn or damaged, do not use the heater. Never leave a space heater unattended. Turn it off when leaving a room. Don’t let pets or children play too close to it. Keep the unit on a flat surface at least three feet away from anything that can burn. Plug the unit directly into the wall. Don’t use an extension cord or power strip.
- **Portable generators** are commonly used in the winter as a result of storm-induced power outages. Follow manufacturer’s instructions to prevent electrical and carbon monoxide hazards.
- **Heating pads** and **electric blankets** also pose a fire risk – especially if more than 10 years old. Don’t allow anything on top of either one while in use – this includes other blankets or pets. Never fold electric blankets or use while sleeping.

Lastly, if there is a fire emergency, call 9-1-1 as soon as possible and remain outdoors. Never return inside a burning building to retrieve an item.

The State Fire Marshal’s Office and the State Fire Academy make up the Division of Fire and Life Safety, which is a division of the S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.