

# Winter Heating Safety Tips

## Space Heaters

Residents that utilize wall space heaters or other heating device should remember to pull all furniture and other combustible items at least three feet away from any heating devices. Space heaters are temporary heating devices and should only be used for a limited time each day and should never be connected to an outlet with an extension cord. When not in use, be sure to unplug the unit and let it cool down if you will be storing the unit. Keep a window ajar or the door open in a room where an unvented heater is in use. Never use heaters to dry clothing or other combustibles. Electric heaters with frayed or damaged cords should never be used. Young children should be kept away from any appliance that has hot surfaces that can cause burns. Kerosene heaters should be cleaned and wicks replaced annually.

## Fireplaces

Never burn charcoal in a wood fireplace. Before using the fireplace for the first time in a season, make sure the flue is open. The flue is a trap door that keeps heat out in the summer and cool air from coming in when the fireplace is not in use. You can check it by looking up the chimney to see if you are able to see daylight. If there are any obstructions, remove them. If not removed, these obstructions will cause carbon monoxide to back up into your home. Carbon monoxide is a deadly, odorless and invisible gas. Artificial logs made from wax and sawdust should be used one at a time. Pressure-treated wood should not be burned in stoves or fireplaces because it contains toxic chemicals that can make you sick. Never leave a fireplace unattended. Chimneys and vents should be inspected and cleaned annually. Have chimneys inspected and cleaned when necessary by a professional chimney sweep. Creosote is an unavoidable product of wood-burning stoves and fireplaces. Creosote builds up in connectors and chimney flues and can cause a chimney fire. Don't burn newspapers or other trash in a fireplace because they burn too hot and can ignite a chimney fire.

## Gas or Electric Furnaces

Gas or electric furnaces that have not been used for several months will most likely have a build-up of dust and dirt on heating elements. This can cause a burning smell and even a light haze of white smoke when first operated for the season. This smell and haze are not harmful, and will take only several uses before all the dust and dirt on the heating unit are burnt away. To be safe, try to run the furnace on a warm day while opening all windows so the smell can escape. If the smoke turns black and the furnace starts to rumble leave the building immediately and call the fire department by dialing 911.

## Smoke Alarms and Carbon Monoxide Detectors

Test your home smoke alarms at least once per week. Do this by pressing the test button on the unit. Some newer models also feature the ability to test the unit with a flashlight as well. If you are unsure as to whether your unit has this feature, check your operations manual or consult the manufacturer.

If you do not have one already installed, install a carbon monoxide detector. Carbon monoxide is a tasteless, odorless, invisible gas, which is absorbed by the human body 200 times faster than oxygen. Carbon monoxide will cause people to fall into a deep sleep and cause death. Gas fireplaces, gas stoves, barbecues, gas furnaces, automobiles, propane appliances and any other

device that produces a flame will produce carbon monoxide.

### **Wood Burning Stoves**

Gasoline or other flammable liquids should never be used to start a wood fire since it might explode or flare up. The directions on artificial logs made from wax and sawdust say they should be used one at a time in fireplaces and never used in wood stoves. This is because the heat can melt the log causing it to flare up or leak burning liquid from the appliance. Pressure-treated wood should not be burned in stoves or fireplaces because it contains toxic chemicals that can make you sick.

### **Barbecues**

Barbecues should never be used indoors or as a heating device. Barbecues produce large amounts of carbon monoxide.

### **Facts & Figures**

- In 1998, there were 49,200 heating equipment-related home fires reported to U.S. fire departments, resulting in 388 deaths, 1,445 injuries and \$515 million in property damage.
- Two of every three home heating fires in the U.S. in 1998, and three of every four related deaths, were attributed to space heating equipment.
- All types of common space heating equipment are involved in home fires: portable electric heaters, portable kerosene heaters, wood stoves, fireplaces with inserts and room gas heaters.

(\*From NFPA's U.S. Home Heating Fire Patterns and Trends)

### **Safety Tips:**

- Space heaters need space. Portable space heaters need a three-foot (one meter) clearance from anything that can burn and should always be turned off when leaving the room or going to sleep.
- When buying a new unit, make sure it carries the mark of an independent testing lab. Be sure that a qualified technician installs the unit or checks that the unit has been installed properly.
- Wood and coal stoves, fireplaces, chimneys, chimney connectors, and all other solid-fueled heating equipment need to be inspected annually by a professional and cleaned as often as the inspections indicate.
- Portable kerosene heaters must be fueled only in a well-ventilated area, free of flame and other heat sources, and only when the device has cooled completely. Use only the type of kerosene specified by the manufacturer for that device, and never use gasoline instead of kerosene. Also, be sure that portable kerosene heaters are legal for home use in your state.
- When turning a heating device on or off, be careful to follow the manufacturer's instructions. When buying heaters, look for devices with automatic shutoff features.
- Be sure any gas-fueled heating device is installed with proper attention to ventilation, and never put unvented gas space heaters in bedrooms or bathrooms. Also, LP (liquefied petroleum) gas heaters with self-contained fuel supplies are prohibited for home use by NFPA codes.