

Oh Christmas Tree, How Brittle are Your Branches?

Before your family puts up a tree or hangs the stockings this holiday season, start a new tradition. Put safety at the top of your list. Too often the twinkling lights people see are on top of a fire truck or ambulance—the result of holiday accidents that could have been prevented.

Trees and lights are danger-prone holiday decorations. According to the United States Fire Administration, Christmas trees start an average of 260 house fires each season, resulting in more than \$16 million in property damage. Another 150 house fires are sparked by holiday lights and decorative lighting, costing \$8.9 million in damage. Typically, all of these fires are more severe and damaging, resulting in twice the injuries and five times the fatalities per blaze compared to average winter home fires.

Unsafe practices while putting up decorations are to blame for even more injuries. Nearly 6,000 individuals visit emergency rooms each year for falls that occur. Four thousand more are treated for injuries associated with extension cords.

But safety steps don't end with bright decorations. Gifts trigger injuries, too. Toys that are not used as intended or used without proper supervision lead to avoidable accidents. Electrical shocks, burns, or injuries from sharp, pointed, or moving parts are to blame for many of these injuries according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

When it is time to deck your halls, take these precautions to ensure the safety of you, your family and holiday guests:

Trees

Real or artificial, short or tall, Christmas trees are often the culprit for danger. Incorporate these safety guidelines in your decorating routine:

- ▶ Make sure an artificial tree is labeled “fire resistant.” Be aware that “fire resistant” does not mean “fire proof.” Exercise caution when it comes to your tree.
- ▶ Make sure a live tree is fresh and green. Dry, brittle limbs and shedding needles are a breeding ground for sparks. Water a live tree regularly to prevent it from drying out.

- ▶ Place any type of tree away from heat sources such as fireplaces, vents and radiators.

Lights

Festive lights give homes a magical glow both inside and out. When decorating this season, a few simple safety tips can keep your spirits bright.

- ▶ Do not overload electrical outlets. Most lights are designed to connect no more than three strands. Inspect the wires periodically to make sure they are intact and not warm to the touch.
- ▶ Never leave lights on overnight or when no one is home.
- ▶ Only use lights that have been approved by an independent testing laboratory.
- ▶ Replace any strands that show signs of damage, such as bare or frayed wires, broken bulbs, or loose connections. Faulty lights can send an electrical charge through a tree and electrocute anyone who comes in contact with a branch.

Gifts

The thrill of holiday presents is quickly forgotten when a gift leads to injury. Here are a few suggestions to keep children safe:

- ▶ Select gifts that are age appropriate for the recipient. Toys recommended for older children pose too many risks for younger children to use safely.
- ▶ Educate children on electrical safety when using any new toy or product that requires an electrical connection.
- ▶ Review all instructions and safety guidelines included with new products before you allow the child to use it. This ensures the safety of the child and protects the integrity of the product.

Make sure safety ranks at the top of your “to do” list this holiday season. Like the old Christmas song says, there is no place like home for the holidays—especially when your family is safe and your home is filled with good cheer. **KCL**

Sources: United States Fire Administration, Consumer Product Safety Commission; and NFPA's Fire Analysis & Research Division.