

Smart Ways to Stay Safe This Holiday Season



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Introduction

The holiday season will soon be upon us. Most people don't think about the dangers around the holidays. They simply don't want to think about them because the holidays are supposed to be full of laughter and good cheer. Unfortunately, each year there are people whose homes burn down, there are car accidents, people's homes are broken into and worse. While it would be great if the holidays could be nothing but merriment and having a good time, it isn't reality.

Hopefully this report will be a wake-up call. It is the goal of this report isn't to bring you down during the holidays. Rather it is to give you something else to think about. The purpose of the report is to help you consider what could go wrong in several areas: holiday decorations, drinking and driving, becoming a victim of theft, toy safety and keeping your home safe when you are away from home. Increase your chances of staying secure as you put these smart ways to stay safe this holiday season into practice.

Holiday Decorations

Each year there are over 1 million fires in the United States. In 2009, the fire departments across the country responded to nearly 1.4 million fires. As a result of these fires over 3,000 people died, 85% were the result of residential home fires. There was also over 17,000 people injured and nearly \$8 billion (yes that was BILLION) worth of damage was done to people's homes. Thankfully some of the calls the fire fighters responded to were false alarms and 65 percent were for Emergency Medical Services not related to fires. Every 84 seconds fire fighters are called out to residential fires. This number increases during the winter holidays.

Did you know there are 156,000 or more fires each year during the holiday season across the country? It is estimated nearly 50,000 of those are residential fires. Of those fires, over 350 residential fires are caused by winter decorations, 250 caused by Christmas tree fires. Unfortunately in these fires homes are damaged, often beyond repair, belongings are destroyed and there can also be injuries or death.

These are startling statistics to be sure but it doesn't mean you have to keep your home Spartan during the holiday season. You may, however, want to choose how much decorating you will do and where you will place those decorations in order to reduce the chance of fire. If your neighbor wants to have a decorating contest with you simply turn them down. Your family's health and safety, as well as keeping your home, is more important than bragging rights for having the most holiday decorations this year.

Residential fires caused by decorations increase from two fires per day throughout the year to nine daily during the winter holidays in many cities and communities. By taking the time to consider the electrical usage of the decorations and placing them far away from a heat source, you can reduce the risk of your home catching on fire.

What You Can Do

Decorating our home for the holidays is nothing new. People have been doing it for centuries in one form or another. Decorations in and of themselves are not a problem. The problem comes when decorations, particularly those requiring electricity, are used in large number.

Think about holiday television commercials, shows or movies you may have seen. Neighbors next to or across the street from one another begin having decorating wars.

Each person feels they have to have bigger and better decorations than the other. Before you know it, there are hundreds of lights, blow-up snowmen and moving reindeer all over the yard and up on the roofs of the homes. The lights are so bright it looks like daytime in the middle of the darkest night.

This may seem funny to a degree, but it is this type of excessive decorating that can lead to a home catching fire. Most likely there are many extension cords run outdoors to run all the lights, fans and other electrical decorations. In many cases these extension cords are overloaded with too many items. There is also a possibility that the cords aren't meant to be used outdoors.

Then think about the lighting required to make that snowman or snow globe visible during the night time. You know there have to be spot lights. What happens when the fabric and plastic decorations aren't being kept aired up? They fall to the ground often landing on the hot lights. This is an accident waiting to happen.

Create a plan for your decorations. How many will you use? What size will they be? Where will the large decorations be located? What about lighting? Will it be simple outdoor lights or will something else be necessary? Do you have the correct extension cords for the decorations you'll put up? By planning ahead you can avoid some of the above problems.

Ensure the electrical lights, decorations and cords have the Underwriters Laboratory (UL) marking on them. The UL has been providing industry-leading services and expertise for over 100 years. What do they do? They test the products we use to ensure they meet strict safety standards. When you see a UL mark, you can feel confident in the product's safety. If the decorations, lights or electrical cords you have don't display the UL mark, even though the items cost you money, for safety's sake you may want to get rid of them.

Be mindful of where you place candles. They should be kept at least four feet away from anything flammable – curtains, drapes, blinds, wooden furniture or bedding. Keep candles and matches away from children. If you do light candles, be sure you blow them out if you leave the room or get drowsy.

If you choose a live Christmas tree each year, get one as early as you can. Most tree lots don't care for the trees they sell, so it's likely the tree will begin to dry out quickly. Once a tree dries out, even if you place it in water when you get home, the more likely it will be to catch fire. You'll also want to maintain your tree daily. Add enough water (up to a gallon a day) to keep the water level above the cut of the tree.

When you decorate your tree, whether live or artificial, try to place it relatively close to an electrical outlet. Carefully examine all holiday lights before putting them on the tree. You're looking for frayed or cracked wires. If the bulbs are broken, find a replacement as a broken bulb could cause a spark.

Placing trees near the electrical outlet will also enable you to use fewer extension cords. If you must use an extension cord, tape it to the floor to avoid tripping over it. You'll also want to check it regularly to ensure the cord hasn't begun fraying from being walked over. Another important thing to remember is to avoid plugging more into the extension cord than is recommended.

When you do place the tree, remember to keep it at least three feet away from any heating source. This could mean air registers, fireplaces or small electrical heaters. You'll also want to keep lit candles away from the tree.

Outdoor decorations don't cause as many fires as those indoors, but that doesn't mean they can't happen. Look for the UL label on all outdoor decorations. If you're in doubt, it is

safest not to use that item. Check the extension cord for fraying and know how many electrical items can be safely plugged into it. Don't overload an extension cord no matter where it is being used.

Keep spot lighting away from anything flammable. This might include fabric decorations or dried trees or grass. Be sure the decorations are placed in such a way not to block exits.

Now that you know a little better how to avoid house fires due to an improperly decorated home, you may want to think about other ways in which you or your family may not be safe during the holiday season.

Alcohol-Related Problems

Personally, I don't drink alcohol at all. We never have alcoholic beverages in our home, and we have a great time without them. But since some people do drink, we need to be aware of the safety issues involved.

Many holiday parties will serve alcohol. People may feel they can hold their alcohol and that they'll be fine to drive home. They may feel fine and not realize that their motor reflexes are slowed and that their perception isn't as acute as it should be. Therefore, one way you or your family might be in danger is if they become involved in a drinking and driving accident.

Every year around 1,200 people die due to alcohol-related traffic accidents during the holiday season. Fatal collisions increase from 41 percent during the entire year to 52% on Christmas day and 57% on New Year's. Besides the 1,200 people who will die nearly 25,000 people will be injured. Do everything you can to avoid being a statistic this holiday season or any day of the year.

How can you avoid becoming a drinking and driving statistic? Here are some things to consider:

* If you are going to a party where alcohol will be served and you have a drink, be sure you designate a driver who will not be drinking alcohol. This person will be responsible for driving everyone in the vehicle with you home safely.

* If you're riding with someone and they've had alcohol to drink, don't get into the car with them no matter how they say they feel and how little they told you they had to drink. People who are inebriated don't realize how they're affected by alcohol. Refuse to ride with them. Call someone who can come pick you up such as a friend, family member or call a cab.

* If you're going out during the holiday season, try to avoid being on the road during the early and late evening hours. This is especially true on actual holidays such as Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day or New Year's Day. You can rest assured that there will be people who have been drinking on the road at these times because statistically these are the times during the holiday season when most drunk driving accidents occur.

* If you're out and about during the holiday season and you see someone who isn't driving safely, don't be afraid to call the police and report that person. Get their license plate number and a description of the car so the police will be able to find them. It will also be helpful to tell them what road they were last seen on and which direction they were travelling.

* If you have friends at your home and alcohol has been available, don't let someone who has been drinking get behind the wheel of their car. Offer to drive them home if you haven't been drinking or take their keys from them. Ask them to stay a little longer and then call them a cab.

Besides holiday parties and the potential to be confronted with alcohol, there are other ways you and your family may not be safe during the holidays. Have you thought about how safe you are when you go shopping?

Shopping Safety

During the holiday season it is so easy to get absorbed in the decorations and shopping, you may not be thinking about how safe you are. Unfortunately, the holiday season is prime time for thieves and pickpockets. They know people are spending money on gifts and so they're looking for an easy target. There are many ways you can avoid being the victim of theft during this time of the year.

* Make a plan of where you'll be shopping before you leave your house. Write down a tentative itinerary so those at home will know approximately where you will be at what time. Carry your cell phone (if you have one) and plan to check in periodically during the time you're out.

* Don't carry much cash with you. In fact, you may want to take a debit or credit card only so you don't have to carry cash at all. On the outside chance you lose your wallet or purse you won't have lost everything. You'll also be able to cancel those cards right away and stop anyone from getting access to your accounts. When all you have is cash, you don't have any recourse. If you must take cash, put it in your front pocket to make pick pocketing more difficult.

* Put your debit or credit card, driver's license and a few dollars in a pocket rather than carrying around a large purse. Of course, if you have a particular reason for taking something larger, by all means do so. However, if you can avoid taking a purse, you won't seem as easy to steal from.

* There is safety in numbers so you may want to ask someone to go shopping with you. Of course, if you have children and you're shopping for them they might not be the best choice. An adult friend or your partner might be a good idea if you can get someone to babysit the children for you.

* Avoid using ATM machines if at all possible. Pay attention to the surroundings and if there are other people near the machine. If there are people nearby, stay in your vehicle with the doors locked until they leave. Choose an ATM that it is well-lit. Quite often thieves

will stay around dimly lit ATMs so they can grab your purse or your money as it is coming out of the machine. Cover your pin number and remove the money from the machine as quickly as possible. Don't forget your receipt. Don't talk with anyone who is near the machine and stay focused on what you came to do. Do it and then get back to your vehicle.

* Park as close to the entrance as possible. You know this isn't going to be an easy task because parking lots are crowded with other busy shoppers. However, the closer you can park the safer you will be.

* Park where your car can be seen. This means parking away from dumpsters, bushes or vehicles which are larger than yours.

* Place your gifts in the trunk as soon as you get to the car. If your trunk is full, be sure to have a blanket to cover the items.

* Do your best to do all of your shopping at one time for each location. If you're at a large shopping mall, don't take packages to your car and then go back in. Either carry the packages with you or rent a cart to help you manage your purchases. Criminals may be driving around the parking lot acting like they're looking for a free parking place. Instead they may be looking for people who put things in their trunk and then leave the car unattended.

* Lock all the doors and the trunk when you leave the vehicle. Cars with doors unlocked are easy prey for thieves.

* If you are carrying a purse, keep it closed at all times unless you are paying for an item. Keep your purse close to your body with the strap across your chest. Walk confidently rather than acting like you're fearful.

* Stay alert by taking a break every so often. You're more likely to become less alert when you get tired. Take time to get a snack, sit in an open area and catch your breath. When you feel ready, you can start shopping again. Be sure to check in with friends or family while you're taking a break.

* Everyone needs to use the restroom but going into a secluded restroom in a mall isn't a good idea. Try to find a restroom where there are other shoppers. Also, if you're shopping

with a child, be sure to go with them to the restroom. Many children are abducted each year from mall restrooms where a parent allowed them to go alone.

* If you're alone and concerned about your safety, don't be afraid to ask the security guard for help. This is especially a good idea if you had to park in a dark area of the parking lot or you're parked far from the entrance. Security guards are used to escorting people to their car as part of their job. Be sure to thank them for their time and help.

* Have your keys out and in your hand as you're headed to your car. You may even want to put them between your knuckles while you're walking just in case someone tries to bother you. You can use the keys as a weapon by poking them in the eye or scratching them to get away.

* Check the backseat of your car before you get into it. Some thieves are able to jimmy the locks on cars and will hide in the back seat. Once someone gets into the car, they can attack from behind without your being able to see their faces.

Again, the purpose of this report is not to scare you. The hope is by explaining some of these things to you, you'll be more aware of your surroundings. By being aware you can be alert and remain safe. Here's another thought. Once you have the gifts purchased, are you sure you and your family are safe?

Toy Safety

Each year the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) receives information about products which are sold and have caused injuries. And each year, often right before or right after Christmas, they release a list of these products which have been recalled by their manufacturers. So even if you're doing your best to protect your child and keep them safe, you may not have thought about toy safety.

The leading cause of death among children 14 and under is unintentional injury. By following these safety tips, you can keep your children safe not only during the holiday season but all year long.

* Go to the CPSC website (<http://www.cpsc.gov>) to check the latest product recall list. Currently there are over 4,500 products on the list. You can read the list and ensure the toys your children have now have not been recalled. You can also make sure the new toys your children want aren't on the list.

* Pay particular attention to the CPSC list of toys containing lead. Lead is hazardous to everyone, but children younger than 6 are more susceptible to lead poisoning. Lead can severely affect their mental and physical development. If it is ingested in large enough quantities it can also cause death.

* Read and adhere to the age recommendations on the toy packaging. Those age limits are placed on the toys for a purpose. Even though your child may be advanced for their age, toys meant for older children can be a choking hazard for small children.

* Avoid toys which have sharp edges and points for all children who are younger than 8. Of course, depending upon the maturity level of your child, you may want to continue that policy until you feel they are ready to handle that type of toy.

* Buy a helmet and pads to go along with a new bicycle. This is especially important for smaller children who are just learning to ride a bike.

* Some people buy toy guns for their children. If you do this, either make sure the gun is colored so it won't be mistaken as a real gun, or paint the barrel to indicate it is a toy.

* Toys with magnets can also pose a health threat to small children. Even though parents tell their children not to put their toys in their mouth, they still do it. Children who ingest small magnets from toys have developed serious health issues when the magnets stick together in the child's intestines.

Home Safety While Traveling

Unless you're confined to your home, most likely you will have some time away from home during the holiday season. You may have to go to work, there is shopping of all kinds to do and you may have a busy social schedule. Protect your home while you're away by following these smart ways to stay safe during this time of year.

First and foremost, be sure to keep your doors and windows locked when you leave your home. It doesn't matter if you're stepping next door to borrow a cup of sugar or getting your mail. If no one is home, take your keys with you and lock the doors behind you. Doing so will keep thieves from slipping inside while you've stepped away.

Find someplace other than your front window to set up your Christmas tree. Having a tree in the window is an advertisement to anyone who has mischief in mind. You'll also want to avoid placing the presents anywhere they can easily be seen from the window or keep the curtains or blinds closed so people can't see.

Don't throw boxes for large purchases away right after you open them. You don't want people to know that you've purchased a big screen television or new computer system. Break down the boxes by opening them and then folding them inside out. You can also cut the box in smaller pieces. Leave the garbage can away from prying eyes until your regular trash pick-up. This will frustrate thieves because they won't know what you got for Christmas so they won't be as tempted to break into your home.

Ask a friend or neighbor to keep an eye on your house if you're going to be away for more than a day. Perhaps you have family to visit in another town or state. Ask someone to pick

up your mail and any newspapers you have delivered. Full mailboxes and newspapers around the door are a sure sign there's no one at home and ripe for the picking.

Put your indoor and outdoor lights on a timer. Set the lights to go on and off at your normal rising and going to bed times. Have the bathroom light go on and off periodically. You can also put a television or radio on a timer so your home sounds like someone is there.

Conclusion

No one wants to concentrate on possible danger during the holidays. Just because you're aware of possible danger doesn't mean you have to dwell on it. You can take some of these smart ways to stay safe this holiday season and incorporate them into your life. You'll be better prepared and will know you've done everything you can to keep those you love protected.