Home Heating Fires - A Burning Issue

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : November 29, 2011 at 8:30 am

OLYMPIA, Wash. - The high cost of home heating and utilities has caused many of us to turn to alternative heating sources such as space heaters, fireplaces and wood stoves. While these alternative methods of heating may be acceptable, they are also a major contributing factor in residential fires. Over one-quarter of heating fires result from improper maintenance of equipment, specifically the failure to clean the equipment.

"Working smoke alarms provide early notification to the presence of smoke. They can alert you and your family to danger," says State Fire Marshal Charles Duffy. "By frequently practicing a home escape plan, household members will be more familiar with exit strategies."

Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning is another danger when using fuel burning heating equipment, and occurs most often when equipment is not vented properly. CO is known as the "silent killer" because you cannot see it, smell it or taste it. At lower levels of exposure, CO causes mild effects that are often mistaken for the flu. These symptoms include headaches, dizziness, disorientation, nausea, and fatigue. The effects of CO exposure can vary greatly from person to person depending on age, overall health, and the concentration and length of exposure.

Preventing Home Heating Fires:

Fireplaces and Wood Stoves -

Be sure the fireplace or stove is installed properly. Wood stoves should have adequate clearance (3 feet) from combustible surfaces as well as proper floor support and protection. Have your chimney inspected annually and cleaned, if necessary.
Keep a glass or metal screen in front of the fireplace opening to prevent embers or sparks from jumping out and unwanted material from going in. Keep flammable or combustible materials away from your fireplace mantel.
Never close your damper with hot ashes in the fireplace. Allow ashes to cool and dispose of them in a metal container.

Space Heaters -

Be sure your heater is in good working condition. Inspect for cracked, frayed or broken plugs or loose connections and exhaust parts for carbon buildup. Be sure the heater has an emergency shut off in case it is tipped over.
Space heaters need space. Keep all things that can burn, such as paper, bedding or furniture, at least 3 feet away from heating equipment.

Never use fuel burning appliances without proper room venting, burning fuel can produce deadly fumes. Use ONLY the fuel recommended by the heater manufacturer.
Plug power cords only into outlets with sufficient capacity and never into an extension cord.

Carbon Monoxide Safety:

· Have a trained professional inspect, clean and tune-up your home's central heating system and repair leaks or other problems. Fireplaces and woodstoves should also be inspected each year and cleaned or repaired as needed.

· Never use an oven or range to heat your home and never use a gas or charcoal grill inside your home or in a closed garage.

· Do not run a vehicle or other fueled engine or motor indoors, even if garage doors are open. Normal circulation will not provide enough fresh air to reliably prevent a dangerous buildup of CO.

Protect Your Home:

Install smoke alarms in every bedroom, outside each sleeping area and on every level of the home. For the best protection, interconnect all smoke alarms throughout the home - when one sounds, they all sound. Test smoke alarms at least once a month.
Install a carbon monoxide alarm in a central location outside each sleeping area. CO alarms measure levels of the gas over time and are designed to sound an alarm before an average, healthy adult would experience symptoms.

For more information on home heating safety, visit the Office of State Fire Marshal website at www.wsp.wa.gov/fire/firemars or the United States Fire Administration site at www.usfa.dhs.gov