

# Have a Warm and Safe Holiday Season

Texas Christmases are seldom white, but chances are it will be cold enough to turn on your home's heating system for at least some of the holiday season. And with a house full of holiday company, the last thing you want is a house fire.

Home heating fires are the second leading cause of fire deaths in American homes and the leading cause of home fires in December and January. In Texas, heating equipment is the fifth leading cause of one- and two-family dwelling fires. Home heating fires killed 9 people in Texas in 2008.

"Home heating fires in Texas and the rest of the United States are mostly caused by human error, particularly through the misuse of portable heaters, wood stoves, and fireplaces," says Texas State Fire Marshal Paul Maldonado. "Portable heaters are the primary means of heating in many Texas homes. Heating safety in these homes requires correct installation, maintenance, fueling, and operation of portable, or space, heaters."

Here are some tips for preventing portable heating equipment fires.

Keep portable heaters at least three feet away from anything that might burn, including furniture, bedding, clothing, pets, and people.

Turn these heaters off when you aren't in the room or when you go to sleep. Don't leave children and pets alone or unsupervised in rooms where space heaters are in use.

Make sure that everyone knows how dangerous it is to dry clothing over these heaters or place combustible materials near them.

Before using electric space heaters for the first time each season, check for fraying or splitting wires and overheating. If there are problems, have them fixed by a professional, or buy a new heater.

Plug space heaters directly into wall outlets; don't use extension cords. And don't overload electrical outlets.

Many Texas households use space and wall heaters that burn propane or natural gas. When using these heaters, the State Fire Marshal's Office recommends the following practices:

Make sure there is an adequate air supply. Home heaters must have an air supply; without it, they may produce carbon monoxide. If you are using an unvented space heater without an oxygen depletion sensor, keep a window or door slightly open.

Make sure that pilot lights are working properly. If your heater has a pilot light and you can't keep it lit, or if the control is hard to operate, have it repaired. All inspections and repairs should be made by trained, licensed service technicians.

Turn off the heater(s) (1) If you smell fumes, your eyes sting, or if you feel dizzy or nauseated; (2) If there is a yellow or fluttering flame; (3) If the vent isn't drawing.

Don't use space heaters with broken or out-of-place ceramic radiants.

If you smell a strong gas odor, turn off all pilot lights, don't flip on any electrical switches (such as room lights) and call your gas company from another location. Small sparks from turning on lights or making a phone call could ignite gas.

Never store or use flammable liquids like gasoline, cleaning fluid or paint thinner near heaters.

Finally, never use the kitchen stove to heat the house, or a grill or other outdoor, fuel-burning apparatus. Whether you have central heat, a fireplace, wood-burning stove, wall heaters, space heaters, or any combination of the above, an annual inspection by qualified professionals will help minimize risk and maximize winter comfort.