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Dangerous December

What Makes December, January and February the Most Perilous Months of the Year?

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What is the single house item that causes more deaths by fire than any other? And why can this common item become so dangerous during December, January and February. Here's a safety checklist.

During the coldest months of the year—December, January and February—space heaters are the leading cause of home fires, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

Space heaters account for 25 percent of home heating fires and 74 percent of deaths, according to the NFPA. Energy experts are concerned that the increase in fuel prices will push consumers into buying all varieties of space heaters which have more potential for hazard. A spokesman for a major home improvement chain acknowledged that space heaters sales have picked up earlier this year.

Yet portable heaters remain the major culprit because they allow for the greatest number of errors by consumers using them, according to the NFPA. The most frequent mistake? Placing the space heater too close to a combustible material.

Blaine W. Fox, a 25-year veteran of the heating and air-conditioning industry, suggests the following safety tips:

- ✓ **Read carefully the directions for its use. "It's the most basic rule of all, yet it's amazing how many consumers fail to read the owner's manual," says Fox. "Take five minutes to familiarize yourself with how the space heater functions and pay close attention to the safety tips."**
- ✓ **Check for a safety endorsement of a national testing laboratory.**
- ✓ **Make a decision based on safety features as well as heating capacity. For example, does your space heater automatically shut off when tipped over?**
- ✓ **Keep your heater at least 3 feet from anything flammable.**
- ✓ **Don't use space heaters for thawing food, drying clothes or thawing pipes.**
- ✓ **Check for frayed insulation if you have an electric space heater.**
- ✓ **Kid- and pet-proof your heater. Never place a space heater where a child or pet could accidentally knock it over.**
- ✓ **Never place a space heater too close to a bed, especially a child's bed.**

- ✓ Keep newspapers, magazines and fabrics from curtains, clothes or bedding away from space heaters, radiators and fireplaces.
- ✓ Check with your child's college or university before buying them a space heater. Some schools have strict guidelines about space heaters' safety requirements and require NFPA safety approval.
- ✓ Choose a space heater with a guard around the flame area or the heating element. This help keeps children, pets and clothing away from the heat source.
- ✓ Pay attention to size. The wrong size could increase indoor pollutants or simply waste energy.
- ✓ Keep doors open to the rest of the house if you are using an unvented fuel-burning space heater. This helps to prevent pollutant build-up and promotes proper combustion. Even vented heaters require ventilation for proper combustion.
- ✓ Never leave a space heater on when you go to sleep or leave the area. For fuel-fired heaters, dangerous levels of carbon monoxide could accumulate or uncontrolled burning could cause a fire.
- ✓ Don't use or store flammable liquids (such as gasoline) around a space heater. The flammable vapors can flow from one part of the room to another and be ignited by the open flame or by an electrical spark.
- ✓ Pay particular attention to mobile homes because they require specially designed heating equipment. Only use electric or vented fuel-fired heaters.
- ✓ Ultimate safety. When not using your space heater, don't just turn it off, unplug it.