

How to Have a Happy (and Safe) Holiday

Written by Tom Monte



Holiday safety, photo: Arizona Structures

We send our heartfelt wishes to you and your family to enjoy a joyous holiday season and encourage you to make it a safe one, too.



Holiday safety, photo: Arizona Structures

Our Gilbert-based general contracting company, Arizona Structures, asks you to be mindful of potential home-related hazards, especially since these can be easily overlooked during this busy time of the year. Many of these seasonal issues are electrical, of course, but it's important to remember that Christmas trees, fireplaces and even decorations can be safety concerns.

And, remember that ladders used improperly can pose a serious threat. In the construction business, fall protection is a core element in our safety program.

Those who have a traditional wood-burning fireplace should consider fire hazards and carbon monoxide dangers during those days when wood fires are allowed in Maricopa County.

Ensure proper ventilation and make sure your flue is cleared of materials. It's always easy to have a professional check your chimney for hazards such as creosote buildup and manufactured-log residue.

"If you are using a live Christmas tree, make sure to check the water level in the tree stand on a daily basis," says Anna Haberlein, a spokeswoman for Arizona Public Service, one of the state's two largest utility companies, with Salt River Project (SRP).

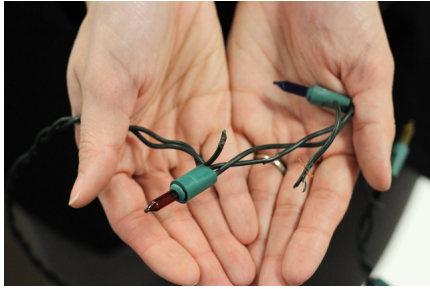
And, "If the tree appears to be losing a large amount of needles, or if the needles become brittle, do not turn on any electrical lights used for decorations," she explains. "The heat from the lights may cause a fire."

Every year, fire departments nationwide respond to hundreds of home fires that begin with Christmas trees or holiday lights, according to the National Fire Protection Association, says Juana Hernandez, for the Safety Connection at SRP, the Valley's largest electric provider.

As you unpack those decorative lights, surge protectors and extension cords from storage, check all wires, plugs and sockets for wear or damage. If you do find damage, repair or replace are the best options. Keep eyes on pets and toddlers; they can easily entangle themselves.

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Holiday safety, photo: APS

Outside, if you're still putting up holiday lights, make sure your ladder is stable and fully functional. Have someone at the bottom of the ladder to help steady it and spot you when you're climbing and descending.

"When stringing lights, use a dry wooden or fiberglass ladder and be sure to stay away from overhead power lines," Haberlein says. Aluminum ladders conduct electricity.

"Avoid stringing any outdoor lighting or electrical cords where the water from irrigation or sprinklers may be present. Water and electricity do not mix and can cause serious injury or even death in these conditions."

And, use only strings of outdoor lights, spotlights, sockets and three-pronged extension cords approved by the Underwriter's Laboratories (UL). Ensure, too, they are not frayed or damaged, Haberlein says.

GFCI (ground fault circuit interrupters) reduce the risk of electrical shock, so make sure that this protection is provided for outdoor outlets. Test the GFCIs this month and every month (Test and Reset buttons are built in) to make sure they're working properly.

If GFCI receptacles are not available, you can use portable GFCI equipment. "The Consumer Product Safety Commission advises that more than two-thirds of the 300 annual electrocutions nationwide could be prevented with the use of GFCI protection," she says.

Relatedly, use more than one circuit to avoid overloading household wiring and follow the manufacturer's recommendation for the number of light strings that can be connected safely.

Think sustainably, too, as you celebrate the season: Use LED (light-emitting diode) holiday lights; they run much cooler than their traditional counterparts, are less of a fire risk and use much less energy.

Inside, your home should have a smoke detector on every level and outside every sleeping area. Have smoke detectors installed properly and tested to ensure they are in working condition.

Also, have at least one Class ABC extinguisher placed in an easily accessible area. An extinguisher with an ABC classification puts out all three types of fires: combustible-liquid; wood, paper and cloth; and electrical.

"It is important to check the pressure in the extinguisher every month and refill or replace if it's low," Haberlein explains. "Know how to properly use the extinguisher."

And, of course, turn off holiday lights before going to sleep or leaving the house unattended. Hardware and other stores have inexpensive appliance timers to help you manage holiday lights.

Have a safe and happy holiday season.

Arizona Structures (azstructures.com) serves the East Valley, Arcadia, Scottsdale and Paradise Valley. This is the final of a 10-part series on your home and was assisted by David M. Brown (azwriter.com).