

**In this issue of the Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) Listserv –
December 16, 2021**

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1. Holiday Safety

The festive holiday season is underway. To keep the season festive, think about safety during your holiday preparations and activities. Here are some tips to avoid hazards and keep the holiday season “merry.”

Hanging lights/decorations:

- Use a properly designed ladder or stepstool to decorate areas beyond your reach.
- Inspect the ladder to be sure it has non-skid feet, no visible damage, and has the proper rating to hold not only your weight but also the weight of the decorations/tools you will be using.
- Make sure stepladders are fully unfolded prior to use. Do not stand on the top rung, climb on the backside of the ladder, or lean out to the side of the ladder.

Electrical hazards:

- Carefully inspect holiday lights and discard or recycle any lights or other decorations with frayed or nicked cords or loose connections. Always turn off holiday lights, both indoors and out, when you leave the house unattended or retire for the night.
- Do not use power strips in series for indoor holiday electrical needs. Instead, arrange items so power strips can be plugged directly into a permanently installed outlet.
- When purchasing/using light strings, extension cords, spotlights, or electrical decorations, look for the certification mark of an accredited organization such as UL (Underwriter’s Laboratories).
- Do not use extension cords in series, rather use a cord long enough to reach the outlet without stretching, but not so long as to become easily

tangled. Plug all outdoor electric decorations into circuits with ground-fault circuit interrupters to avoid potential shocks.

- When hanging outdoor lights keep electrical connectors off the ground and away from metal rain gutters. Use insulated tape or plastic clips to hold them in place, not metal nails or tacks. Ensure your lights or other decorations and cords are rated for outdoor use.

Fire safety:

- Test your smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors if you have not recently done so, and make sure that they are UL-listed.
- Choose a Christmas tree with fresh, green needles that do not fall off when touched. Water the tree daily. Keep the tree at least three feet away from fireplaces, radiators, portable heaters, candles or other heat sources. When purchasing an artificial tree look for the label “Fire Resistant.”
- Use noncombustible or flame-resistant materials to trim a tree. Replace any string of lights with worn or broken cords or loose bulb connections. Read instructions on the number of light strands to connect.
- Make sure trees and other decorations do not block exits.
- Do not burn wrapping paper in a fireplace. Keep candles away from decorations and other things that can burn. Two of every five home decoration fires are started with candles. Extinguish all candles when you leave a room or go to bed.

These are just a few tips to help keep you safe during the holidays. Look around your home for other hazards.

Resources

- EHS Ladder Safety SOP <https://ehs.unl.edu/sop/s-ladder.pdf>
- EHS General Electrical Safety SOP <https://ehs.unl.edu/sop/s-electricalsafety.pdf>
- Black Hills Energy “Your how-to-guide to staying safe through the holiday season” https://www.blackhillsenergy.com/blog/safety/staying-safe-though-holiday-season?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=safety_how-to-guide-staying-safe
- NFPA “Winter holiday safety:” Christmas Tree Safety Tips <https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/Public-Education/Resources/Safety-tip-sheets/ChristmasTreeSafetyTips.pdf>

- NFPA “Winter holiday safety:” Winter Holiday Safety Tips
https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/Public-Education/Resources/Safety-tip-sheets/Winter_Holiday_Safety.pdf
- Consumer Products Safety Commission “Holiday Safety Information Center” <https://www.cpsc.gov/Safety-Education/Safety-Education-Centers/holiday-safety>
- Parents.com “12 Tips for Holiday Home Safety”
<http://www.parents.com/holiday/christmas/safety/12-tips-for-holiday-home-safety/>
- EHS Today “Home Safety: Holiday Fire Prevention Tips
https://www.ehstoday.com/safety/article/21920475/home-safety-holiday-fire-prevention-tips?NL=OH-05&Issue=OH-05_20191119_OH-05_589&sfvc4enews=42&cl=article_3_b&utm_rid=CPG03000001591939&utm_campaign=38559&utm_medium=email&elq2=aad8331712554e90a359eca36690c2c6&oly_enc_id=2894C7426278G7W
- “Holiday Safety - National Safety Council.” NSC: Enjoy a Safe Holiday Season - Decorate Safely, www.nsc.org/home-safety/tools-resources/seasonal-safety/winter/holiday. Accessed 3 Dec. 2021

2. Safety Shorts – Holiday Safety Tips

This series features links to short safety resource(s) each month. The focus this month is holiday safety. Every year more than 15,000 injuries related to holiday decorating result in emergency room visits. NFPA reports that U.S. fire departments respond to an average of 230 home fires involving Christmas trees every holiday season. Unattended cooking is the leading cause of fires in the United States.

- **Safety Tips for Your Christmas Tree** (WebMD, duration 1:16 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hKqQ5Rf-d0>
- **5 Holiday Cybersecurity Safety Tips** (KnowBe4, duration 2:46 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3caWO5bP5o>
- **12 tips for the Winter Holiday Season** (KnowBe4, duration 3:04 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3PA7-XhVO8>

NOTE: Resources are provided for informational purposes only. Publication does not in any way endorse a particular company or product or affect current UNL policies and procedures.

3. Situational Preparedness: Commit, Watch, Respond

The Chancellor's University Safety Committee sponsors a Heads Up! campaign to encourage the campus community to safely walk/bike/drive to avoid injury.

In 2019 there were over 3142 fatalities in the United States due to distracted driving. The most frequent factors leading to a fatality were inattention, cell phone or personal device, outside person or event, eating or drinking.

After all the years of raising awareness of the hazards of distracted driving, why are so many people still dying and being injured? One reason may be that if a person drives “distracted” and there is no bad result, bad habits are reinforced. Just because an outcome is positive one time does not change the fact that the **next** time distraction can turn your life and the lives of those around you, upside down.

There are three main types of distraction:

- Visual. For example:
 - Looking at a passenger or something else in the vehicle
 - Checking a GPS device
 - Taking in the scenery
 - Reading a text
- Physical. For example:
 - Reaching for food or drink or something that fell onto the floor
 - Removing or adding a layer of clothing
 - Smoking a cigarette or vaping
 - Adjusting mirrors
- Mental. For example:
 - Inattention blindness where the driver sees but does not register their surroundings
 - Highway hypnosis which can occur with long periods of driving on relatively straight highways, especially those with little traffic.

Minimize distractions by:

- Preparing ahead of time so your GPS is programmed and set up for verbal directions. Select your radio station before starting to drive.
- Keeping distractions to a minimum. Silence your cell phone or personal device or use an app that sends others a message you are driving and will respond later.
- If you have passengers, do not become so engrossed in conversation that your mind is not on the road even if your eyes are.

What to do:

- Avoid driving if you are over-tired. Drowsiness results in mental distraction.
- Focus on the four safe driving activities: scanning the road, checking mirrors, reading instruments/gauges/other controls, operating the vehicle safely.
- Drive defensively to avoid other drivers who are distracted.

How to identify a distracted driver:

- You can see the driver using a cell phone.
- Vehicle going slower than others, typically used to provide a sense of “safety” when knowingly driving distracted.
- Sudden movement of the vehicle or driver.
- The vehicle is “lane drifting.”

Safe responses to distracted drivers:

- Stay to the right on multi-lane roads and let the driver pass. In certain instances, it might be most safe to signal and pull off for a while.
- Stay calm. Do not honk as that may startle the distracted driver and cause the vehicle to swerve. Do not make rude gestures, cut off the vehicle or flash your lights.
- Do not tailgate and do allow extra stopping distance for your own vehicle.

Would you close your eyes and drive with your hands off the steering wheel on a dare? If they answer is “no” then realize driving distracted is the same thing. People typically do not drive distracted on purpose, rather do so without thinking. When you drive: Commit to driving, Watch the road, and be prepared to Respond to whatever situations arise.

~Information courtesy of J.J. Keller & Associates, Inc.

4. Plan Ahead to Avoid Injury

There were a number of “near misses” at UNL that could have been avoided by thinking ahead of acting. Following are the incidents with suggestions to prevent them happening to you:

- Person walking down steps missed a step resulting in a dislocated ankle. When navigating steps ensure full attention is on the task and handrails are used.
- Person wearing a broken flip flop fell while going down a set of stairs resulting in knee injury. When navigating stairs wear appropriate intact footwear and use the handrail.
- Person riding a bike bumped the curb and fell off the bike resulting in a possible concussion. When biking, pay close attention to the roadway/bike path to remain alert to and avoid any obstacles and wear an approved biking helmet.
- Person fell on wet stairs outside a campus building resulting in a hurt back. When confronted with wet walkways, if possible, find a path that is flat to avoid stairs. Use handrails if available. Walk carefully as you would navigating ice and snow (walk like a penguin).
- Person using a pH probe in a 6M hydrochloric acid solution dripped acid onto their arm while moving the probe to a buffer solution. There was no burn injury due to timely rinsing their arm but there easily could have been. When working with hazardous materials pay attention to body position and equipment proximity. Transfer items that might “drip” using a secondary container to avoid drips.
- Person reached over a lit Bunsen burner while working on an experiment lighting their lab coat sleeve on fire resulting in burn to their arm and one finger. When doing potentially hazardous tasks make sure your full attention is on task and you maintain awareness of body position in relation to the hazard.
- Person fell on spilled liquid while carrying a glass jar resulting in a cut from broken glass. Clean up spills or find another path so you are not walking on wet slippery surfaces, in particular if you are carrying breakable items.
- Person was preparing to use a graduated cylinder to transfer a hydrogen chloride solution. They did not check whether the cylinder had previously been used/had residual HCl inside before holding the cylinder top down against their leg. There was residual HCl in the cylinder which dripped out resulting in a burn on their leg.

Plan ahead. Think safety – Don’t learn by accident.

Resources

- EHS SOP Slips, Trips, Falls – Reducing Risk and Avoiding Injury
https://ehs.unl.edu/sop/s-slips_trips_falls.pdf

- Really Obvious: On Ice
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Gv6QNZytF8>

5. NEW SOP: Anaerobic Chambers

Anaerobic chambers are designed to provide an oxygen-free environment to facilitate growth of anaerobic microbes. The anaerobic chamber is purged with an inert gas, generally nitrogen, to remove most oxygen. An airlock is used to minimize introduction of air into the chamber while transferring samples into and out of the chamber. Depending on user needs, anaerobic chambers can be found in many configurations, sizes, and with various gases.

This Safe Operating Procedure reviews the following components relevant to the lifecycle of an anaerobic chamber:

- Hydrogen Gas Safety
- Setup/Commissioning
- Biosafety
- Decommissioning

Resources

- EHS SOP **Anaerobic Chambers** https://ehs.unl.edu/sop/s-bio-anaerobic_chambers.pdf

6. Help Us to Better Help You

Environmental Health and Safety is committed to excellent customer service and offers a *Customer Satisfaction Survey* as an easy method for the campus community to provide feedback on our services and staff. By taking a few moments to complete the survey (<http://ehs.unl.edu/survey>), you will be helping us to identify areas where we might need to focus our attention.

In order to effectively evaluate potential areas for improvement, please provide specific information or examples and your name and contact information. The Director, Brenda Osthus, follows up on all submissions. We greatly appreciate your participation.

Please feel free to contact Brenda Osthus, EHS Director, at 402-472-4927 or bosthus1@unl.edu if you would rather communicate outside the parameters of this survey.

THINK SAFETY – DON'T LEARN BY ACCIDENT!

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