

In this issue of the Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) Listserv – December 4, 2024

1. Holiday Safety Tips
 2. Safety Shorts – Holiday Safety Around the House
 3. Carbon Monoxide is a Silent Killer
 4. Situational Preparedness – 10 Causes of Distracted Driving
 5. Help EHS Help You Better
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1. Holiday Safety Tips

The holiday season is beginning. 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:

- To decorate areas beyond your reach, use the proper ladder or stepstool. EHS Ladder Safety Safe Operating Procedure provides guidance.
- 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 outside, 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 accrediting 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. Observe instructions on the number of light strands that can be safely connected.
- 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 the room or go to bed.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), every year, hospital emergency rooms treat about 12,800 people for falls, cuts, shocks, and burns due to incidents involving faulty holiday lights, dried-out Christmas trees and other holiday decorations. Stay safe and merry this holiday season by following the tips provided.

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-through-holiday-season?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=safety-how-to-guide-staying-safe

- NFPA “Heating Safety Tips” <https://www.nfpa.org/downloadable-resources/safety-tip-sheets/heating-safety-tip-sheet>
- NFPA “Christmas Tree Safety Tips” <https://www.nfpa.org/downloadable-resources/safety-tip-sheets/christmas-tree-safety-tip-sheet>
- NFPA “Holiday Fire Safety Tips” <https://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/home-fire-safety/winter-holidays>
- NFPA “Winter Holiday Safety Tip Sheet” <https://www.nfpa.org/downloadable-resources/safety-tip-sheets/winter-holiday-safety-tip-sheet>
- Consumer Products Safety Commission “Holiday Safety” <https://www.cpsc.gov/Safety-Education/Safety-Education-Centers/holiday-safety>

2. Safety Shorts – Holiday Safety Around the House

This series features links to short safety resource(s). The focus this month is holiday safety. 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>
- **12 tips for the Winter Holiday Season** (KnowBe4, duration 3:04 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3PA7-XhVO8>
- **Ladder safety for holiday decorating** (OtterTailPowrCo, 3:52 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX4Zn3g8azw>

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. Carbon Monoxide is a Silent Killer

Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden illness or death. Each year more than 400 Americans die of carbon

monoxide poisoning. Carbon Monoxide = danger! Carbon monoxide (CO) is found in fumes produced by burning fuel in cars, trucks, gas grills, furnaces, fireplaces, as well as other appliances and equipment. The most common symptoms of CO exposure are headache, dizziness, weakness, upset stomach, vomiting, chest pain and confusion. These symptoms are like the flu but improve if you move to an area of fresh air. Too much CO can make you pass out or kill you.

Some tips to prevent CO poisoning:

- Do not operate fuel-burning tools/equipment/machines (e.g., camp stoves, heaters, forklifts, power washers, generators, etc.) indoors, including inside a garage. Use battery or electric powered alternatives.
- Carbon monoxide poisoning can result from the use of gasoline or kerosene-powered heaters or generators in an inadequately ventilated area.
- Install a CO detector and regularly test the unit/change batteries.
- Have your gas-powered home heating system serviced by a qualified technician yearly.
- Make sure gas-powered appliances are vented properly.
- Never use a gas range/oven for heating to substitute for central heating.
- Never burn charcoal indoors.
- Never leave a vehicle idling in a garage, even if the garage door is open. When idling vehicles or equipment such as snowblowers outdoors be sure there is no air-intake close that could allow exhaust to enter the building.

Carbon Monoxide can't be seen, can't be smelled, can't be heard but can be stopped by following safety precautions, including installation of a carbon monoxide detector. Seek prompt medical attention if you suspect CO poisoning and are feeling dizzy, light-headed, or nauseous.

Resources

- Safety+Health Magazine. (2021, August 20). *Carbon monoxide: The silent killer*. Safety+Health Magazine. Retrieved October 21, 2021, from https://www.safetyandhealthmagazine.com/articles/21630-carbon-monoxide-the-silent-killer?utm_source=safetytips-topic&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=topic

- *Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Basics* | CDC. (n.d.).
https://www.cdc.gov/carbon-monoxide/about/index.html?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/co/guidelines.htm
- Other Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) resources:
 - https://www.cdc.gov/carbon-monoxide/media/pdfs/Flyer_Danger.pdf
 - https://www.cdc.gov/carbon-monoxide/media/pdfs/Generators_1.pdf
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/carbon-monoxide/media/pdfs/Furnace.pdf>
- Full Service Chimney™. (2021, September 10). *Caution: carbon monoxide & chimneys*. <https://fullservicechimney.com/caution-chimneys-carbon-monoxide/>
- Cedars Sinai “Carbon Monoxide Poisoning” <https://www.cedars-sinai.org/health-library/diseases-and-conditions/c/carbon-monoxide-poisoning.html>

4. Situational Preparedness – 10 Causes of Distracted Driving

Situational preparedness is so important that this listserv regularly provides resources and information on safe walking, driving, bicycling, scootering, skateboarding. Distracted driving is the major cause of motor vehicle-related injuries and deaths. For most people, driving is their riskiest daily activity. The common factor in driver-induced risk is drivers paying attention to something other than driving. Data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System which surveys all American motor vehicle fatalities uncovered the top 10 causes of distracted driving.

1. **Smoking related– 1%.** One in a hundred accidents is related to lighting a cigarette, smoking or putting it out.
2. **Moving objects – 1%.** Moving objects in the car such as insects and pets can lead you to take your eyes off the road.
3. **Using devices/controls to operate the vehicle – 1%.** Adjusting things like mirrors or seatbelts causes about one percent of distraction-related car accidents.
4. **Adjusting audio or climate controls – 2%.** Fiddling with the radio or adjusting the A/C for even a moment is a factor in about two percent of traffic fatalities.
5. **Eating or drinking – 2%.** Every car has cupholders—and using them can be a definite source of distraction.
6. **Using or reaching for a device brought into the car – 2%.** We all know that using devices like cellphones can take our minds off the task of

driving. But it turns out that even reaching for them can lead to a serious accident.

7. **Other occupants – 5%.** Other people in the car can place major demands on your attention when you're driving, which can result in a collision.
8. **Outside person, object or event – 7%.** It turns out that looking at something or someone outside the car, like gawking at an accident or at people in other cars, is even more of a distraction than the person in the passenger seat.
9. **Cellphone use – 12%.** The second-leading cause of deaths due to distraction-related car accidents won't be a surprise to anyone, as cellphones while driving (even the hands-free options) can distract us in a number of ways. But if they're not the biggest cause then what is?
10. **Generally distracted or "lost in thought" – 62%.** By far the biggest cause of distracted driving fatalities is a driver's mind wandering for long enough to lead to a collision—and someone's death.

Items 1-9 are the result of conscious distraction. These items indicate complacency by drivers who decide they can take their mind and eyes off the road by doing one of the activities listed. After driving for a while it's easy to forget how dangerous driving is and lead us to multitask.

Multitasking is a myth. The brain can only do one thing at a time. When we 'multitask' the brain actually switches back and forth between two tasks. When the brain is 'switched off' the driving task, even for a few seconds the results can be catastrophic. Rushing, frustration and fatigue can influence decisions while driving. Drivers often focus solely on eliminating Items 1-9 which is a good start.

However, as you can see, #10 the largest cause of injury & fatality may not be intentional. Inattention/mind wandering can be overcome by being intentional when driving and consciously working to keep your mind focused on "the task of driving" while operating a motor vehicle. When driving, the amount of risk is difficult to compute considering other drivers and constantly changing conditions so assume great risk. Evaluation of ever-changing situations on the road requires focus. Pay attention and when your mind starts to wander and pull it back to the task of driving safely.

Resources

- *SafeStart. (2014, July 10). Top 10 causes of distracted driving—and what they all have in common. SafeStart. <https://safestart.com/news/top-10->*

[causes-distracted-driving-and-what-they-all-have-common/?utm_medium=banner&utm_source=ehstoday&utm_campaign=24a073](https://ehs.unl.edu/customer-satisfaction-survey?utm_medium=banner&utm_source=ehstoday&utm_campaign=24a073)

5. Help EHS Help You Better

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. Would you please take a few moments to complete the survey (<https://ehs.unl.edu/customer-satisfaction-survey>)? This will help EHS to identify areas where we might need to focus more attention.

To effectively evaluate potential areas for improvement, please provide specific information or examples and your name and contact information. 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.

Adopt Safety as Your Attitude – DON'T LEARN BY ACCIDENT!

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