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Plan now to prevent house fires this winter

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Fire & Rescue says check alarms, map out escape route

Blow out the candles; turn off the space heater; don't leave cooking food unattended.

It's not that people don't understand how to prevent fires, said Rusty Gipson, an investigator with Huntsville Fire & Rescue. Most fires are simply the result of carelessness.

"We always try to cover the same things, because we see the same things over and over and over again," he said.

Huntsville firefighters and fire investigators spent every day this week at Parkway Place Mall for a fire prevention expo, part of National Fire Prevention Week.

With cool weather arriving, fire departments across the country are pushing people to clean out chimneys, check smoke detectors and practice general fire safety.

It's especially important in Alabama, where fire-related deaths were the third highest in the country in 2006, said Deputy Fire Chief Mike Sublett.

Huntsville had no fire-related deaths in 2006, and only one person has died from injuries related to a house fire so far this year, said Sublett.

"We're really fortunate, to be honest," he said. "In the last 10 years, we have probably averaged no more than two fire deaths each year."

It only takes a few minutes to take life-saving steps like checking smoke detector batteries and fire extinguishers and developing an escape plan, said Investigator Greg Spurell.

"Most people are familiar with their houses and surroundings," he said. "It wouldn't take long for them to develop a plan and pick a meeting place."

Huntsville Fire & Rescue recommends changing smoke detector batteries twice a year, or when the time changes.

That way, smoke detectors have new batteries in early fall - Nov. 4 this year - before people begin firing up space heaters and fireplaces, said Sublett.

Once that smoke detector begins to beep, though, it's time to get out, Gipson said. People often overestimate the amount of time they have to get out of their homes after the smoke alarm goes off.

"People think, 'If my smoke detector goes off, I've got about five minutes or so to get out,' " he said.

"Actually, they only have about a minute to a minute and a half."

Huntsville Fire & Rescue recommends the following tips - some traditional, some with a little modern twist - to stay safe this winter:

Use only space heaters and appliances approved by Underwriters Laboratories, which are marked as "UL approved." Today's UL standards require that space heaters have automatic shut-offs if they tip over.

If you have to leave the room while you're cooking, take a spatula or oven mitt with you. You're more aware that you need to get back in the kitchen if you're holding a reminder, said Sublett.

Don't use extension cords as permanent cord extenders. They build up heat - even if the appliance isn't plugged in - and can ignite nearby flammable materials. Use a power strip or surge protector instead.

Celebrate the holidays carefully. More people burn candles, cook and stretch extra wires and cords during the holiday season, said Sublett. Check old Christmas decorations and make sure you don't have any exposed wires or other hazards.

Don't put fireplace ashes in plastic or paper bags, especially if they haven't been thoroughly doused with water. Although a fire may have been put out hours earlier, ashes can still smolder.

Clean out that chimney. Ashes and bits of material in the chimney can catch fire, even a year later.

If you use a kerosene heater, don't put the kerosene in the same container that you used for lawnmower fuel. Even a tiny drop of gasoline can cause an explosion in a kerosene heater. Get a new can; preferably a blue one marked "kerosene only."

Don't wait until you see flames. Smoke can be just as dangerous, if not more, than fire.

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