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Safety Tips for The Holidays

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From candles to candy and trees to toys, nearly every joyful holiday tradition also carries the potential for accidents and injuries.

Safety experts say a bit of forethought and preparation can head off many common holiday mishaps. In fact, recent research indicates the worst holiday disasters, such as Christmas tree fires, actually occur before the big day, not in the cleanup phase.

Avoiding decorating disasters

Lights, outside and in, are one of the hallmarks of Christmas. But lights, especially on fresh Christmas trees, can spark fires.

National Fire Protection Association (<http://www.nfpa.org/>) research indicates 43 percent of falls each year from Nov. 1 to Jan. 31 are from ladders, and another 13 percent are from roofs. Meanwhile, holiday lights are the culprit in 150 house fires annually.

Christmas trees can catch fire even if they're just near an open flame, sparking electrical lights, or overheated decorations, says Amy Artuso, the National Safety Council's (<http://www.nsc.org/pages/home.aspx>) community and home safety specialist.

- Test electric lights and electrified decorations before putting them up. Check for worn, unsafe plugs, frayed cords and unsafe connections.
- Keep fragile ornaments on wire hangars at the top of the tree, out of reach of children.
- If you have a fresh tree, be sure to water it daily. It only takes a couple of days for unwatered trees to dry into kindling.
- Keep floor decorations corralled under the tree and not underfoot. That includes tree skirts, toy trains, decorative villages and piles of presents.

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- Don't use prickly roping on handrails, making it difficult for people to grasp the rails as they go up and down stairs.

Snuff out candle dangers

"Candles are a huge part of Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa," says Artuso. It's easy to overlook lit candles in the bustle of getting to and from events. "Never leave home with candles lit," says Artuso.

Statistics reinforce her concern: The National Fire Protection Association (<http://www.nfpa.org/>) reports that 50 percent more candle fires occur in December, and fire risk more than doubles when candles are used as part of decorative arrangements. Unattended candles were a factor in nearly 20 percent of home candle fires.

Also, flameless candles should be turned off, especially when used in arrangements of greens and paper decorations. "You don't know how hot LED candles will get," Artuso points out.

- Keep candles at least 12 inches away from anything that can burn.
- Blow out candles when you leave the room.

Little children, big risks

Visitors, decorations and new toys introduce danger into typically safe houses.

For instance, holiday candy is everywhere. So it's understandable that a toddler might swallow the bright blue pills he found in a relative's purse under the dining table.

- Have visitors place their purses and backpacks in a secure location, such as a bedroom with a door that locks.
- Make sure holiday plants don't include tempting berries. Poisonous berries can be found on mistletoe, holly and Jerusalem cherry plants.
- Always buy helmets for new bikes, skateboards and scooters so kids can hop on safely right from the start, Artuso recommends.

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Good eats, healthy treats

When you're hosting, it's up to you to accommodate special needs.

Try to confirm your guests' special dietary needs in advance so you can plan your menus around them, recommends Nicole Morrison, a registered nurse with the Kenosha Visiting Nurse Association in Kenosha, Wis.

Some people must avoid salt; those watching their blood sugar levels must avoid sugar and simple carbohydrates. "The holidays are a hard time for diabetic patients to comply with their diets, so try to have some sugar-free alternatives," she says.

- If you'll be serving alcohol, always designate a driver in advance.
- As you plan your menu, figure out how you will handle anticipated leftovers. Cooked food should not be left at room temperature for more than two hours, says Artuso.
- Have plenty of clean (<http://www.kvna.net/>) containers on hand for divvying up leftovers, if that is your family tradition.
- Be sure crudités and raw fruits are not mixed with meats, fish and protein on cutting boards or in the refrigerator.

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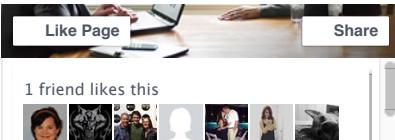
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Arrive safe and sound

"Over the river and through the woods" makes for a great song but a harrowing drive. Snowy roads, icy intersections and obscured signs can be the last straw for already-stressed drivers, points out Artuso. Safe travel can be one of your family's traditions.

- Provide guests with clear directions well in advance.
- Replace outdoor light bulbs in advance so your driveway, garage, walkways and porch are well lit.
- Don't cover lights with decorations.
- Position porch decorations so they don't complicate snow removal.
- If you are borrowing child car seats, be sure you install them well in advance, according to manufacturer's directions.
- Schedule plenty of travel time between events.

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