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Consumer alert: NYS DCP warns of carbon monoxide and fire hazards during extreme cold weather DCP offers tips to help New Yorkers stay safe & warm

Guest Submission by the New York State Division of Consumer Protection

The New York State Division of Consumer Protection on Friday issued a consumer alert about the dangers of carbon monoxide and fire hazards in extreme cold weather. The winter months pose the most risk for these hazards – as the temperatures drop, consumers may turn to dangerous heating alternatives to stay warm. Propane heaters, generators, space heaters and/or outdoor grills all pose lethal risks of carbon monoxide poisoning and fire hazards when used improperly.

“We are in the height of the winter months with shorter daylight hours and extreme cold weather. To help fight the extreme cold weather, many people seek additional ways to keep warm, and these heating methods can often be dangerous,” said Acting Secretary of State Robert J. Rodriguez. “There are basic tips New Yorkers can follow to help stay warm and, most importantly, safe throughout the winter months.”

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colorless and odorless, but deadly, poisonous gas. It is produced by the incomplete burning of various fuels, including coal, wood, charcoal, oil, kerosene, propane and natural gas. Products and equipment powered by internal combustion engines such as portable generators, snowblowers and cars produce the gas. CO from these sources can build up in enclosed or partially enclosed spaces. People and animals unknowingly breathing in CO can be poisoned, resulting in significant health risks, including death.

When temperatures plummet, home heating systems run for hours, and the

potential for CO poisoning increases. In severe weather, using alternative sources of power can also cause CO to build up in the home. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, every year at least 430 people die from accidental CO poisoning across the United States, and 50,000 people seek emergency accidental CO poisoning treatment at hospitals.

Colder temperatures also increase the risk of fire hazards. Portable space heaters used incorrectly can start a fire. Having space heaters plugged in, along with too many electronics, can overload extension cords, causing them to ignite.

The New York State Division of Consumer Protection offers the following tips to keep families safe and warm this winter:

Home Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Prevention Tips

✓ Install carbon monoxide alarms. There should be a carbon monoxide alarm on every floor of a home. Such alarms are required on every floor of new home construction.

✓ Inspect all fuel-burning equipment every year. Have a trained service technician inspect your home heating systems. Make sure that all gas heaters are properly vented to the outside.

✓ Use generators safely. Do not use a gas or electric generator in a home, garage, basement or any enclosed space. Plug in appliances to the generator using only individual heavy-duty, outdoor-rated electrical cords. When used, gas generators should be located at least 20 feet from any window, door or vent – preferably in a space where rain and snow does not reach them.

✓ Grills are for outdoor use only. Do not use a gas or charcoal grill indoors or inside a garage, as they release deadly fumes.

✓ Avoid build-up of carbon monoxide fumes. Open the fireplace damper before lighting a fire and keep it open until the ashes are cool. Never use a gas range or oven to warm up a home. Never leave a vehicle running while parked in a garage attached to a home, even if the windows are open. Have vehicles' mufflers and tailpipes checked on a regular basis to prevent accidental CO build-up.

If one suspects carbon monoxide poisoning, they should get to fresh air immediately and then call 911.

Winter Home Heating & Fire Safety Tips

✓ Safely operate fireplaces, wood stoves and other combustion heaters. Use fireplaces, wood stoves, or other combustion heaters only if they are properly vented to the outside and do not leak flue gas into the indoor air space. If planning to use a wood stove, fireplace or space heater, follow the manufacturer's instructions. Do not burn paper in a fireplace.

✓ Keep your home properly ventilated. Ensure adequate ventilation if using a kerosene heater. Also, use only the specific type of fuel a heater is designed to use – don't substitute with another source.

✓ Keep space heaters away, stable, and uncovered. Space heaters should be kept at least 3 feet away from beds, clothes, curtains and other flammable materials. Never cover a space heater or place on top of furniture or near water. Space heaters should not be left

unattended when used near children. If a space heater has a damaged electrical cord or produces sparks, stop use immediately.

✓ Check your extension cords. Extension cords should not be overloaded or run where they can become a tripping hazard. Never run extension cords under carpets or rugs. Avoid using extension cords with a space heater.

✓ Prepare for emergencies. Keep a multipurpose, dry-chemical fire extinguisher near the area to be heated. Regularly review fire safety plans with your family, especially with homes with young children, older adults, and persons with disabilities. Make sure there is a working smoke alarm on every level and outside of sleeping areas, and that the batteries in the alarm are functional. If there is a power failure at home, use battery-powered flashlights or lanterns instead of candles, if possible. Never leave lit candles unattended.

Additional resources are offered through the NYS Office of Fire Prevention and Control's carbon monoxide virtual toolbox, and the through the NYS Department of Health cold weather tips page.

The New York State Division of Consumer Protection serves to educate, assist and empower the state's consumers. Consumers can file a complaint with the DCP at <https://dos.ny.gov/consumer-protection>. For more consumer protection information, call the DCP helpline at 800-697-1220 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays, or visit the DCP website at <https://dos.ny.gov/consumer-protection>.

Space heaters need space: Home heating is essential during cold winter months

Guest Editorial by the Firefighters Association of the State of New York

New York is well into the winter months and residents have been doubling up on the heat – bringing out their space heaters and curling up next to their fireplaces on top of their heating. The Firefighters Association of the State of New York (FASNY) wants to remind everyone to follow some simple tips when preparing their homes for winter.

With more people staying home for longer periods due to the COVID-19 pandemic, New Yorkers may face an increased risk for home fires. Heating is one of the leading causes of fires in the United States. According to data from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), half of all home heating fires occur in December, January and February. Fire departments across the U.S. responded to an estimated average of

48,530 fires involving heating equipment each year from 2014-18. These fires resulted in 500 civilian deaths, 1,350 civilian injuries and \$1.1 billion in direct property damage. As of this week, New York state is fifth in the nation in fire deaths for the year with 105.

“Many people continue to work from home, leading to an increased use of heat appliances,” FASNY President John P. Farrell said. “Fire departments throughout the state typically see an increase in the number of fires they respond to this time of year, with many caused by improperly operated or poorly maintained equipment.”

Space heaters and fireplaces can increase the risk of a home fire when used improperly. Homeowners should check that all their heating equipment is functioning properly, and double-check that their carbon monoxide and smoke

detectors have fresh batteries.

“Always make sure your smoke detectors and carbon monoxide alarms are operational and have fresh batteries,” Farrell said. “We recommend everyone place carbon monoxide alarms outside of sleeping areas in the home. It is also important that they check the exhaust pipes of their heating units as they could become blocked with snow or debris. We want all New Yorkers to be fire-safe this winter, and remember: If your smoke or carbon monoxide alarm goes off, get out quickly, stay out and call 911”

Here are some home heating tips from FASNY and the NFPA:

✓ Keep anything that can burn at least 3 feet away from heating equipment.
✓ Have a 3-foot “kid-free zone” around open fires and space heaters.
✓ Never use your oven to heat your home.

✓ Have a qualified professional install stationary space heating equipment, water heaters or central heating equipment according to the local codes and manufacturer's instructions.

✓ Have heating equipment and chimneys cleaned and inspected every year by a qualified professional.

✓ Remember to turn portable heaters off when leaving the room or going to bed.

✓ Always use the right kind of fuel, specified by the manufacturer, for fuel-burning space heaters.

✓ Make sure the fireplace has a sturdy screen to stop sparks from flying into the room. Ashes should be cool before putting them in a metal container. Keep the container a safe distance away from your home.

✓ Test smoke alarms at least once a month.

Niagara County Tribune/Sentinel

Founded February 14, 1987

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or commercial classified ad must be

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Corp. before deadline for insertion.

The **Tribune** is published weekly.

Display Ads Deadline: MONDAY 5 PM

New York State Press Association,

Niagara County Builders Association,

Grand Island Chamber of Commerce,

Wheatfield Business Association Inc.,

Niagara River Region Chamber of

Commerce, The Niagara USA Chamber.



NIAGARA FRONTIER PUBLICATIONS

