

Gwinnett County

Department of Fire and Emergency Services



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Cold Weather Increases Fire Calls

LAWRENCEVILLE – (January 5, 2010 at 2:36 p.m.) Gwinnett County Firefighters are readying for a busy winter season. Cold weather means an increase in the number of structure fires that firefighters will respond to. “Home heating is a leading cause of residential fires in Gwinnett County,” said Captain Thomas Rutledge, spokesman for the Gwinnett Department of Fire and Emergency Services. Many of these fires occur due to poorly maintained heating appliances or those that are placed too close to combustibles.

When turned on for the first time-the furnace, whether gas or electric, may produce a burning smell or even a slight haze of dust inside the home. This happens because the furnace sits during the spring and summer and is not used. According to firefighters, this is not a cause for alarm. They suggest opening doors and windows for a few moments to air out the rooms and allow the dust and odor to dissipate. If the odor and dust persist while the furnace is in use, shut the appliance off and call a service technician. Call the fire department, if there is any sign of smoke or fire from the appliance. Having the furnace serviced annually by a certified professional can help reduce the chances of a fire starting and prevent a carbon monoxide emergency. Repairs should be done only by someone qualified for the job.

If you use space heaters or portable heaters, remember to keep them away from combustible materials such as clothing, boxes and furniture. It is also a good idea to place them out of the way of high-traffic areas. A space or portable heater can be easily tipped over. Children and pets should be kept away from any heat producing appliance. If you leave your home for any period of time, be sure to turn the heater off.

A fireplace or wood stove is a popular way to heat a home. Only use a fireplace or wood stove that has been installed properly. The chimney should be cleaned and inspected annually by a certified professional. Check the damper to ensure that it is open while the fireplace is in use. Never close the damper when hot ashes are in the fireplace. Closing the damper could cause toxic levels of carbon monoxide to spread throughout the home. Use a glass or metal screen in front of the fireplace to keep hot embers or sparks from jumping out and igniting furniture or carpeting.

Before going to sleep, make sure that the fire in the fireplace is out. The damper should be left open until ashes or glowing embers have cooled and are no longer producing heat. Hot ashes from the fire place should be placed in a metal container and removed from the home. Place the container outside at a

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safe distance away from the house. Never attempt to use a range top stove or an oven as a supplemental way to stay warm. Not only is it a safety hazard, it could also be a source of potentially toxic fumes.

Carbon Monoxide (CO) can kill or cause long-lasting health problems. CO binds tightly to red blood cells and keeps sufficient oxygen from getting to the body. It is especially dangerous for children, pregnant women, people with heart disease, and the elderly. Early signs of CO poisoning are similar to *flu-like* symptoms and include: headache, sleepiness, nausea, shortness of breath, and dizziness. If you suddenly feel these symptoms, you should go outside in the fresh air. If you begin to feel better in the fresh air; then you may be experiencing a CO poisoning emergency. Call 9-1-1 to report the emergency and don't go back inside the structure until the problem is corrected and it is safe to enter.

Finally, install CO alarms in your home. CO is a by-product of combustion, present whenever a fuel is burned. Potential sources of carbon monoxide are: gas or oil furnaces, refrigerators or clothes dryers, water heaters, fireplaces, charcoal grills, gas ranges, wood burning stoves, space heaters, and gas powered generators. Never run your cars engine or any other gas powered vehicle or equipment in the garage, even if the garage door is open. Doing so could cause toxic CO fumes to enter your home. Firefighters suggest having potential problem sources inspected annually by a certified technician. If you suspect a CO leak or the CO alarm sounds, call 9-1-1 and evacuate immediately.

Firefighters suggest that following simple fire safety rules can help ensure your family's safety during the winter season. Install and maintain working smoke detectors on every level of your home, develop a home escape plan, and practice fire drills with the entire family. Purchase escape ladders for upper floors and last, have a multi-purpose dry-chemical fire extinguisher for use on small fires. For more information on fire safety, please contact the Education Section of the Gwinnett County Department of Fire and Emergency Services at 678.518.4850.