

Is your house a winter wonderland or a nightmare before Christmas?

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Maybe it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas around your house, but what seems festive to adults can become lethal to children. Bridget Boyd, MD, pediatrician and Loyola University Health System pediatric safety expert, has tips to make sure your holiday doesn't become a nightmare before Christmas.

"Christmas is a wonderful time of year, but it can quickly turn tragic if we're not careful," Boyd said. "Sometimes in our attempts to make Christmas extra special for our kids and grandkids, safety can get lost in the mix."

According to Boyd, safety is an important part of all Christmas activities, including decorating and gift-giving.

Decorating

When picking out the perfect natural Christmas tree, the fresher the better.

"Think about the movie 'A Christmas Story' and don't get a tree like that. A fresh tree will have fewer needles falling off. Dry trees are a [fire hazard](#), and if you have small children or pets they could ingest the needles that have fallen off the tree," Boyd said.

She also suggested making sure that the bottom of the tree is cut off

before bringing it into the house and that the tree stand is always filled with water. Place the tree away from fireplaces and portable heaters as this is a fire hazard.

When trimming the tree, make sure the bottom branches have kid-friendly ornaments that won't break, are free of sharp edges and do not pose a choking hazard. Also avoid using decorations that look like candy or food, especially if there are small children in the home.

The lights on the tree should be designated for indoor use. Test them to make sure all the bulbs work before placing them on the tree. When leaving the house or going to bed, turn off all lights as a safety measure.

The tree is not the only Christmas plant that can be dangerous for children. The following plants can cause stomach issues if ingested:

- Jerusalem Cherry Plants
- Mistletoe
- Holly Berries
- Poinsettias
- Amaryllis

Gift-giving

Shopping for infants and toddlers can be difficult since many toys are labeled appropriate for ages 3 and up. Though it may limit the options, Boyd said following age-appropriate guidelines are important for keeping kids safe.

"Age labels are monitored closely and should be taken seriously. Choking and strangulation hazards can mean life or death to a child," Boyd said. "When opening gifts also watch out for ribbons that could be

a strangulation hazard. Try to keep older children's gifts away from younger children so there is not accidental ingestion of a small part."

If a child is under the age of 2, they are more than likely going to put whatever they are given in their mouth, so avoid items with paint, chemicals or small parts. Also, button batteries are extremely dangerous for small children.

"Go to the emergency room immediately if a child has placed a button battery into their body. This includes swallowing as well as shoving up the nose or in the ear," Boyd said.

Still, gift-giving safety is not just about swallowing hazards, it is also thinking about the entire well-being of a child.

"When thinking about what gift to give, try to find something that encourages the child to use their imagination and get up and get moving," Boyd said.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children spend no more than two hours in front of a screen each day. This includes video games, computers, phones and TVs.

"So many young kids want cell phones, but is that really the best gift to give a child? Think about what is age-appropriate. There will be plenty of time to give phones and videos games in the future," Boyd said.

If you do give an electronic gift, Boyd said supervision is key – especially if it involves the Internet.

"Unfortunately, cyber predators and cyberbullying are becoming more common and pose a very real risk to children. If your child does receive a computer for Christmas, make sure you supervise their internet use.

The best place for a computer is in the family room," Boyd said. "There should be no screens – including computers, TVs or phones – in a child's or adolescent's room. Screen time can interfere with sleep as well as distract them from participating in healthier activities for body and mind."

It is also a good idea to check consumer websites such as recall.gov and saferproducts.gov periodically to ensure gifts are safe and have not been recalled. She also suggests checking out the American Academy of Pediatrics website for more safety information.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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