

Cold front sparks dangerous use of space heaters

November 20 2014, by Stasia Thompson

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) estimates that more than 25,000 residential fires and more than 300 deaths are caused each year by space heaters. More than 6,000 Americans receive hospital emergency room care annually for burn injuries associated with room heaters.

"Bitter cold, ice and snow are here for many parts of the East and Midwest, bringing with it burn injuries caused by improper use of heating devices," said Michael Mosier, MD, burn surgeon at Loyola University Medical Center. The Loyola Burn Center is one of the busiest in the Midwest, treating nearly 700 patients annually in the hospital and another 3,500 patients each year in its clinic.

The Burn Center at Loyola University Medical Center is warning the public about the dangers of space heaters used by so many to keep warm.

"If proper precautions are taken, space heaters can be used safely, but so often they aren't and house fires ignite," said Mosier, who is an assistant professor at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

"Whole families are seriously injured, often for life." About 40 percent of Loyola's burn cases are children and the majority of these children are ages 2 and younger.

Some key tips from Loyola and the U.S. Department of Energy for space heater safety include:

- Keep space heaters at least 3 feet away from furniture or other combustible material, such as curtains and bedding. Don't place heaters on carpets or rugs.
- Locate space heaters on a hard, level surface where a child or family pet cannot brush up against them.
- Never leave a space heater on when an adult is not present in the room.
- Never keep flammable liquids near a space heater.
- Mobile homes should use only vented fuel-fired heaters or electric heaters.

Electric Space Heaters

- Electric space heaters are the safest space heaters for the home. Plug electric space heaters directly into a wall outlet and use a heavy-duty cord of 14-gauge wire or larger if an extension cord is needed.
- Buy a unit with a tip-over safety switch to shut off the heating element if the unit topples over.

Combustion Space Heaters

- Use unvented combustion heaters only outside your home because they can introduce harmful products such as [carbon monoxide](#) and nitrogen oxide into your breathing area.
- Vented units that are sealed combustion heaters are safer to operate than others because they are less likely to backdraft and harm indoor air quality.
- They operate more efficiently because they do not draw in the heated air from the room and exhaust it to the outdoors.
- Follow manufacturer's recommendations and use only the approved fuel.

- Never fill a heater that is hot.
- Never overfill a heater. Allow room for fuel expansion.
- Store fuel outdoors.
- Have vented space heaters professionally inspected each year. If the heater is not vented properly or is blocked, rusted or corroded, dangerous levels of carbon monoxide (CO) may cause illness or even death.
- Do not go to sleep with a fuel-fired heater on as carbon monoxide levels could rise and be fatal.
- Make sure there is a guard around the heating element or flame area.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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