

Winter Fire Safety Tips

By B. Michael Thurlow, fire chief

Even though we haven't had a major storm event yet this year, it seems like an opportune time to review some basic winter fire safety tips. Emergency access and egress leads the list. If you have an emergency that requires fire, police, or EMS it is very important that we have adequate access to get to you. That means the driveway and walkways are clear so first responders don't have to shovel their way in, wasting precious time that could be better spent resolving your emergency.

Every home should have at least two remote means of egress. That means at least two different ways to leave in case you have a fire or some other type of emergency that requires immediate evacuation. Are your front door and steps shoveled and is there a path beyond the steps where you can safely and quickly get away from the house and meet the fire department near your driveway or mailbox at the designated meeting space you identified in your home evacuation and safety plan? How about your back door? It is very easy to get lazy and fail to shovel the secondary steps and doors that aren't routinely used during the winter, but that is the very means of egress you may need to use in an emergency. Once you get out of the house, are you up to your waste in snow, or do you have a shoveled path where you can quickly and safely evacuate a safe distance away?

During severe winter storms the fire department responds to a number of calls for Carbon Monoxide (CO) problems. The vast majority of these are due to direct vent heating appliances with blocked exhaust vents due to drifting snow that hadn't been removed. Many heaters are vented directly through the wall where they are installed. It is critically important that these vents remain clear so they function properly. If the vent becomes blocked the byproducts of combustion, including CO, will back up into the home possibly causing illness and even death if concentrations are high enough. When you're clearing a safe egress path after the next snow storm, make sure to check your exhaust vents to confirm they are clear of snow or other restrictions.

Carbon Monoxide is colorless, odorless, and tasteless so it is critical that you install and routinely test a CO detector on each level of your home to alert you if concentrations are unsafe. Carbon Monoxide kills over 150 people each year because human senses can't see or smell it.

Heating is the second leading cause of home fires following cooking, and 29% of home heating fires occurred because the heat source was too close to combustible materials. If you are using space heaters, fireplaces, or stoves make sure that you keep anything that can burn at least three feet away.

Another frequent cause of winter fires is improper disposal of ashes. When you empty the ashes from your stove make sure to use a metal bucket, and dispose of them properly, in a safe place away from the house. Using a plastic pail that will eventually melt, or leaving an ash bucket outside your home next to the building's siding, are two common but very preventable causes of many house fires.

Please take a few minutes after each snow storm to make sure your house and property is in order, and while you're at it, check on your neighbors and family members. The life you save by following these winter fire safety tips may be your own!

If you have any questions about this article or any fire department issue please contact me at mthurlow@scarboroughmaine.org or 730-4201.