



CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF
PUBLIC HOSPITALS AND HEALTH SYSTEMS



California State Firefighters' Association

California's Public Hospitals and Firefighters Urge Diligence to Prevent Winter-Related House Fires and Injuries

*Hospitals and firefighters see increase in burns, smoke inhalation and
carbon monoxide poisoning due to seasonal causes; urge stronger precautions*

Oakland, CA, December 17, 2009 – The California Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems (CAPH) and its member hospitals, along with the California State Firefighters' Association (CSFA), are urging all Californians to take precautions to prevent house fires and burns and other injuries that are more prevalent in winter months.

In winter, fire departments see a higher percentage of fires and injuries caused by reasons not seen as often or at all during other times of years – causes such as space heaters, candles, and Christmas trees. Public hospitals see the result of these incidents when the victims of these accidents appear at their doors – often with life-threatening burns, smoke inhalation, carbon monoxide poisoning or other injuries.

“Each winter we see an increase in patients suffering from burns or other injuries caused by fires related to the season,” said Yvonne Karanas, M.D., director of Santa Clara Valley Medical Center's Burn Center in San Jose. “These cases are particularly heartbreaking because we know that most are preventable,” she added. Santa Clara Valley Medical Center has a top-level burn center that typically sees patients from six surrounding counties and each year treats about 250 patients who require hospitalization. Six of California's public hospitals operate regional burn centers, which together represent more than half of all regional burn centers in the state.

“People need to stay particularly vigilant about wintertime hazards,” said Kevin Nida, president of CSFA, “and take necessary steps to prevent a fire in their home. Just one spark can cause a house to go up in flames.”

Nationally, the winter months see the highest number of home fire deaths. During December, January and February, heating equipment is the leading cause of home fires, causing approximately 60,000 each year; space heaters are responsible for about two-thirds of home heating fire deaths. Candles are the second-leading cause of home fire injuries (after cooking), with December seeing almost twice the number of candle-related home fires than an average month.

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Although most people may think of *burns* when they think of fire-related injuries, public hospitals see fire victims with other serious problems as well. “Smoke inhalation can be extremely harmful to the lungs, and result in permanent health damage or death,” said Victor Joe, M.D., medical director of the burn center at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center in San Bernardino.

Lower-income populations are at greater risk for winter-related fires – perhaps because they may be less able to afford heat or electricity, or smoke detectors. Public hospitals, whose patients are often low-income, may treat a greater proportion of winter-related house fire victims than do other medical facilities.

Important tips from firefighters

Fire officials have numerous tips to keep winter-related fires from happening, as well as suggestions for how to escape a fire should one occur. CSFA’s Nida recommends that all people be mindful of where they place space heaters and candles, and always having a plan for exiting the residence in the case of any kind of fire. And although a *lit* Christmas tree can present a serious fire hazard, Nida pointed out that the danger from these trees often comes *after* the holiday – when the tree becomes dried out and more fire prone. He also noted that many local fire agencies will provide smoke detectors to those who cannot afford them.

Scald injuries, carbon monoxide poisoning also problems in winter months

Public hospitals also report an uptick in scald injuries and carbon monoxide poisoning in wintertime. “Our burn center sees more patients with scalds during winter, especially among toddlers who may topple a pot of hot soup or a space heater,” said Dr. Karanas. “Parents of young children need to take extra precautions, and make sure to use only a stove’s back burners to cook and keep hot food and appliances out of reach.”

Carbon monoxide poisoning also becomes a danger in winter, as many people attempt to heat their homes with unsafe methods. “Carbon monoxide is particularly hazardous because it is odorless and colorless and can cause illness or even death quite quickly,” said Dr. Joe. “We advise people to never use a gas range or oven to heat their home, make sure gas heaters are properly ventilated, and never use a charcoal or barbeque grill indoors.”

As part of their awareness efforts, CAPH and CSFA have produced educational materials that will be distributed in public hospitals’ outpatient clinics and included on hospital Web sites. “We’re here to provide the best possible treatment should anyone fall victim to such a tragedy,” said Dr. Joe. “But of course our goal is to keep people from ever needing this care at all.”

For more information, log onto www.caph.org or www.csfa.net.

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