

October 20, 1992

KEEP YOUR FAMILY SAFE THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

DALLAS--Along with holiday festivities come seasonal dangers. Children especially are at risk.

"Injuries of all kinds increase at this time of year," says Dr. James Atkins, internal medicine professor and co-director of the emergency medicine education program at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

Hospital emergency departments treat more victims of violent crimes, attempted suicide and motor vehicle accidents during the holidays. Many are related to increased alcohol consumption, says Atkins.

Doctors also see more burn and accidental trauma victims who are injured at home during the holiday season. The tragedy is that many of these injuries are preventable.

Atkins offers these tips for keeping you and your family safe during the holidays:

Christmas trees--Natural Christmas trees are extremely flammable. "A dried-out tree and a spark--it's like a bomb," says Atkins.

When buying a cut tree, look for a deep green color and needles that bend between your fingers. Keep the tree well-watered in a sturdy stand. Consider purchasing a living tree that can be planted outdoors after the holidays. Artificial trees should be fire resistant. All trees should be kept away from heat sources and walkways.

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Decorations--Ornaments can be particularly dangerous to children, says Atkins. Don't place breakable ornaments or those with small detachable parts on lower Christmas tree branches. Children can cut themselves on broken ornaments; detachable parts present a choking hazard.

Candles--The glow of candles can make a home seem more festive but can also be a hazard. Don't display lighted candles near a tree. If you place Hanukkah candles--real or electric--in the window, position them to avoid contact with curtains and draperies. Never leave burning candles unattended or where children can reach them and knock them over.

Lights--Use miniature lights to decorate Christmas trees. The larger bulbs generate more heat and are more likely to start a fire, says Atkins. Check each light set for broken or cracked plugs, frayed or bare wires and loose connections, and discard sets that are worn or damaged. Outdoor lights should be weatherproof and clearly labeled for outdoor use. The wiring of indoor lights isn't designed to withstand exposure to cold, snow and rain. Wires damaged by the elements pose a safety hazard.

Poisonous plants--Parts of many holiday plants, including holly berries and the leaves and stems of poinsettias, can cause stomach problems if ingested. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Display them out of reach of children and pets.

Toys--Protect children from as-yet-undiscovered hazards in new toys. Check newly opened toys for breakage and move packaging materials out of reach of young children. "We've had cases of children eating the Styrofoam in which a toy was packaged," says Atkins. Pay attention to the age recommendations on toys. They often pertain to a child's physical development, not how "smart"

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he is. Allowing a child to play with older siblings' toys could be dangerous. Remind older youngsters to keep inappropriate playthings away from younger children.

Child-proofed homes--'Tis the season for family reunions, but are grandma and grandpa ready? To make a place safe for children, lock medicine chests and cabinets that contain household chemicals. Move hot foods, glassware and knives to the back of kitchen counters. Remove sharp objects from the bathroom. Make sure guns are stored in a safe place out of children's reach. Keep beds away from windows and drapery cords. Remove knickknacks from bedside tables, especially during nap time. Keep a list of emergency numbers by the phone.

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