



Published January 4th, 2023

Winter safety tips from MOFD

By Vera Kochan

Even though experts are predicting another relatively dry winter for California, it doesn't mean that occasional storms like the one this week won't pop up to wreak havoc on those who are not prepared. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District's website offers dozens of Winter Safety Tips to help residents get through the season out of harm's way.

Power outages could happen without warning due to severe weather or other reasons. Make sure to have battery-operated flashlights and radios close at hand to avoid an unnecessary scavenger hunt scenario in the dark, and remember that those items are useless without fresh batteries. Make certain to keep your cell phone well-charged, because a power outage's duration could be lengthy. MOFD recommends unplugging electric appliances in order to avoid overloading circuits and fire hazards when the power comes back on, thereby creating a power surge. Leave a lamp on to indicate that the power has returned. Make extra ice by freezing water in plastic containers to keep foods from spoiling. To report downed power lines call 9-1-1 or Pacific Gas & Electric at 1-800-743-5002. Do not go near it yourself. Leave that to the experts. To check on current power outages visit: pge.com/outagecenter.

Many times during power outages it is more convenient to light a candle. After all, if it was good enough for the pioneers, it's good enough for us. Also, candles do a good job of adding light to a room, and that's not even mentioning the romance factor. If using candles, keep in mind the many safety precautions. Always keep a burning candle in sight; never burn a candle near anything flammable; keep candles away from children and pets; use a sturdy, nonflammable candle holder; and never use a candle as a nightlight. Fireplaces help to keep the house warm in the event of a power outage, but they can also be another source of danger. Make certain that you use a metal mesh screen to prevent sparks from popping out of the fireplace and igniting something nearby. Never use lighter fluid to start a fire in your home - it is not a barbecue. If you haven't used your fireplace in a long time, call a professional to clear it of any possible combustible items and remove any low hanging branches away from the outside that could catch fire. Chimneys should be fitted with a mesh screen and spark arrester.

Take care to have your house rain-ready to avoid any type of water damage both inside and out. Making sure to clean out gutters of any debris allows for an uncluttered drain pipe and possible gutter overflow. By the same token, make certain to keep all drains in yards, driveways and pool decks clear to avoid water backing up into the home. Remember that rain rivers can also cause fallen leaves to accumulate onto a drain and create a plugged effect. Try to check the drains during breaks in the rain to make sure they are not blocked. Also, Lamorinda offers sandbags free of charge to residents who may live in problem areas. In order to save money on the electric bill, space heaters work to warm up a room and add direct heat. MOFD recommends the purchase of space heaters with labels from reputable testing laboratories. Plug the space heater directly into an outlet. Do not use extension cords or power strips that can overheat. Try not to put heaters in high traffic areas where someone can trip over them; keep flammable materials at least three feet away from the heat; and unplug the heater when it's not in use. There are space heaters available that shut off when they are knocked over.

Inclement weather can be a danger to even the safest of drivers. Hydroplaning and skidding can be prevented on wet roads by driving slowly and carefully. Keeping a larger than normal distance from the vehicle in front of you will prevent you from braking hard and skidding. Make certain that the car's tires are properly inflated. The pressure changes during extreme cold and heat (winter and summer). Also, check to see that there is sufficient treading on the tire. Bald tires are useless in the rain. Windshield wipers should offer clear visibility when in use. Check for dried out wipers with cracks.

In most, if not all, of the safety tips plain old common sense is key to staying safe during the winter months. Remember, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

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