Minnesota Department Public Safety and Department of Health officials are urging Minnesotans to be aware of safety hazards in the home as they celebrate the holidays and settle in for the winter.

Fires, unsafe toys and carbon monoxide are among the biggest concerns this time of year, said Dr. Ed Ehlinger, Minnesota Commissioner of Health.

"The holiday season and the beginning of winter are a time for joy and celebration, but they also pose special risks," Dr. Ehlinger said. "As people alter their normal routines for the holidays and begin spending more time indoors, they should take steps to protect themselves and their families."

Fires

According to State Fire Marshal Jerry Rosendahl, 80 percent of the 56 fire deaths in Minnesota during 2011 occurred in the home - and residential fires occur most frequently during the holiday season. Last year, 166 home fires were reported between Dec. 24 and Jan. 1.

Every year, the leading causes of fires are cooking incidents, candles or other open flames, and heating problems. Careless smoking is the leading cause of fire deaths.

The State Fire Marshal offers these safety tips:

• **Holiday Decorations**: If you have a real tree, water it daily. Do not combine more than three light strings unless the product directions say you can. Do not overload electrical outlets. Keep wiring for lights hidden from children - it poses an injury risk, and may also contain lead.

• **Candles**: Place candles on a solid base, away from decorations and other flammable materials. Do not leave burning candles unattended, and keep them away from children. Consider using flameless (battery-powered) candles; they're attractive, safe - even scented - and priced much like their wax counterparts.

• **Heating and Fireplaces**: Make sure your central heating system is clean and working properly. Use space heaters carefully - follow directions and keep them away from combustible materials. If you have a fireplace, keep the chimney clean and free of creosote. NEVER burn wrapping paper in your fireplace.

• **Cooking:** Stay on top of things when you cook! Never leave the stove unattended. Don't try to cook if you're sleepy, taking medications, using alcohol or otherwise impaired. Keep pressurized containers and flammable materials - including cleaning products - away from the stove. Keep your stovetop clean and free of grease. If you have a grease fire, DO NOT try to put it out with water; water will spread the flames. Don't move the cooking vessel. Instead, smother the fire with a lid or cookie sheet and turn off the burner.

• **Smoking**: Quitting now will reduce long-term health risks and eliminate a serious fire hazard.

Don't smoke when you're tired, on medication, using alcohol or otherwise impaired. When you finish a cigarette, put it out completely in an appropriate, stable container. Remember that the peat material in planters is flammable, and cigarettes deposited there may smolder until they start a fire.

Unsafe Toys

Last year, the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) issued 30 recalls of unsafe toys, and 15 have been issued to-date in 2012. In most cases, the potential risks were burns, choking or injuries, but exposure to lead or lead paint continues to be a possibility.

“It can be difficult to determine whether a toy poses a lead hazard,” said Randi Callahan, State Lead Case Monitor. “Older toys, home-made toys and toys with red or yellow paint are more likely to contain lead; having toys tested is the best protection.”

Callahan suggested checking the CPSC website for possible recalls at http://www.cpsc.gov/cgi-bin/prod.aspx.

Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide (CO) problems tend to spike during the winter; in 2011, nearly one-third of incidents reported to Minnesota fire departments - 472 out of 1,732 - occurred in January and December.

These precautions will help protect you and people you live or work with from CO poisoning:

• All homes should have CO alarms and smoke detectors; both can be purchased at discount hardware and building supply stores.

• Have a qualified technician inspect your furnace and check fuel-burning appliances in the fall. Make sure all fuel-burning appliances are adequately vented and properly maintained.

• When using a fireplace, wood stove or space heater, provide adequate ventilation.

• Portable propane camping equipment and gas barbecues are approved for outdoor use only. They should never be used inside cabins, tents, fish houses, recreational vehicles or boats. Read labels on recreational appliances and follow manufacturers' operating instructions.

• If your car is stuck in the snow, clear the tail pipe of snow before starting the engine. Keep it clear if you use the engine for heat. Watch for symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning.

• During power outages, do not use gasoline engines or burn charcoal in enclosed spaces, including a garage, even if the door is open. Do not use gas stoves or ovens to heat living areas.