

# **The DANGERS of Christmas decoration?**

## **Story at-a-glance**

- More than 80 percent of Americans decorate their homes as part of their holiday celebrations.
- Home fires related to holiday lights, candles and Christmas trees are common this time of year, along with fall-related injuries from hanging holiday décor.
- Many Christmas decorations, including holiday lights, spray-on snow and scented candles, contain toxic chemicals linked to cancer, hormone disruption and other health risks
- Since Christmas stands for family togetherness more so than any other holiday, it is the time of year when you may become acutely aware of any such voids in your life, magnifying feelings of isolation and loneliness; maintaining a sense of emotional balance is incredibly important.

# **The Dangers of Christmas Decorations**

**By Dr. Mercola**

More than 80 percent of Americans decorate their homes as part of their holiday celebrations.<sup>1</sup> For many, Christmas wouldn't be the same without colored lights, garland, stockings hung from the mantel and, of course, a carefully decorated Christmas tree. For the most part, holiday decorations are a source of joy that only adds to the spirit of the season, but it is important to take some safety precautions to avoid unnecessary health risks during this special time of year.

## **9 Top Christmas Decoration Dangers**

### **1. Christmas Tree Fires**

Every year, Christmas trees are implicated in an average of 240 home fires, including a related 13 deaths, 27 injuries and \$16.7 million in property damage.<sup>2</sup> While relatively uncommon, Christmas tree fires are unusually likely to be serious and are more likely to result in deaths than other home fires. While any Christmas tree can pose a fire risk, natural trees are more likely to catch fire than artificial trees. This is especially true if they dry out, rather than being kept moist. In most cases, electrical failures or malfunctions cause the tree to start on fire, although heat sources too close to the tree, decorative lights and candles may also play a role.

### **2. Holiday Light Fires**

Each year, about 150 home fires occur due to holiday lights, resulting in an average of 8 deaths, 14 injuries and \$8.5 million in property damages. Usually fire is the result of electrical failures or malfunctions with the lights.

### **3. Falls**

Falls while holiday decorating send about 5,800 people to emergency rooms every year. Most often, injuries result from falling off a ladder (such as while hanging Christmas lights and other outdoor decorations), followed by falling off a roof.<sup>3</sup> Less often, falls from furniture or caused by tripping on tree skirts or other decorations are also reported.

### **4. Spray-On Snow**

Simply shake up the can and spray to add a frosty look to just about any surface ... the problem is, many of the sprays contain a slew of chemicals, including acetone and methylene chloride, which you can inhale while spraying the snow (and before it dries). Nausea, headache and light-headedness are common symptoms that can result if you inhale spray-on snow, particularly if you're working on your craft in a small or poorly ventilated room. In the long-term, the chemical exposure may be much more serious, as methylene chloride is a probable carcinogen.

### **5. Christmas Lights Containing Lead**

We've covered fires relating to holiday lights, but these products are also often tainted with toxins, including lead. In fact, in California Christmas lights must carry a warning label stating that they contain chemicals that may be carcinogenic and cause birth defects. Researchers have found that four out of five holiday lights tested contain lead, 28 percent of which contained lead at such high levels they would be illegal to sell in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Both the wiring insulation and bulb bases often contained the toxic metal.

While manufacturers say the use of lead is necessary to stabilize cord casings and make the lights heat resistant, lead-free stabilizers are widely available and already in use by some manufacturers. However, because there's a good chance your holiday lights may contain lead, wear gloves and then wash your hands whenever you handle them.

That said, the lights' lead-containing casing is typically made from polyvinyl chloride (PVC). One of the main problems with PVC is that it contains phthalates, or "plasticizers," which are endocrine-disrupting chemicals that have been linked to a wide range of developmental and reproductive "gender-bending" effects that are particularly dangerous to infants and children. These chemicals are often found in household air and dust, so it may be better to string your holiday lights outdoors only.

## **6. Candles**

It probably won't come as a surprise to learn that the top three days for home candle fires are Christmas Eve, Christmas day and New Year's Day. December is also a particularly "busy" month for candle fires, which often start because combustible seasonal decorations are kept too close to the flame.<sup>5</sup> There is another, far more insidious, danger to candles aside from fire, and that is that they can release hundreds of chemicals, including cancer-causing benzene, into your home's air every time you burn them. This is particularly true of scented candles, as the fragrance oils often contain phthalates, which have been linked to numerous hormonal disruptions, breast cancer, early or delayed puberty and more. This is true not only of scented candles, but also of other holiday fragrances, such as air fresheners and potpourri.

## **7. Tinsel and Other Choking Hazards**

Holiday decorations, with all their shine and glitter, are especially tempting to infants, who can quickly choke on items like tinsel, small ornaments, tiny pinecones and pieces from nativity scenes. Be sure to keep all such hazards well out of the reach of children; this includes popular holiday food items like nuts and hard candies, too.

## **8. Sugar/Fructose in Candy Canes and Other Holiday Treats**

Candy canes and other sweets are a traditional part of the holiday season, but the sugar and/or fructose they contain pose one of the biggest dangers of all. Evidence is mounting that sugar is a primary contributing factor not only in obesity and diabetes, but other chronic degenerative diseases such as cancer. Excessive fructose consumption, for instance, leads to insulin resistance, which appears to be the root of many, if not most, chronic diseases. Fructose also raises your uric acid levels—it typically generates uric acid within minutes of ingestion—which in turn can wreak havoc on your blood pressure, insulin production, and kidney function. So far, scientific studies have linked fructose to about 78 different diseases and health problems. Further, when you eat sugar it triggers the production of your brain's natural opioids -- a key factor in addiction. Your brain essentially becomes addicted to the sugar-induced opioid release, not unlike additions to morphine or heroin, and this may explain why one piece of candy often leads to another, and then another.

## **9. Mistletoe and Holly**

Poinsettias are often regarded as the most poisonous holiday plant, but contrary to popular belief these plants are actually not toxic to people. Mistletoe, on the other hand, is poisonous. Eating any part of the mistletoe plant, but particularly the berries and leaves, can lead to gastrointestinal upset, while some varieties contain toxins that can lead to blurred vision, blood pressure changes and even death. Holly is also poisonous, and consuming just 20 berries may be lethal to a child.

## **A Word About Holiday Stress**

Christmas can be a wonderful break in the daily routine that pervades the rest of the year, or it can be the most stressful of times. Since Christmas often stands for family togetherness more so than any other holiday, it is the time of year when you may become acutely aware of any such voids in your life, magnifying feelings of grief, isolation and loneliness.

You may also be facing financial difficulties or health issues, or have unrealistic expectations of making your holiday "perfect." The stress can become overwhelming, even under the best circumstances. If emotional stress is a burden to you this time of year, I suggest trying the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) to help you remove negative emotions and enjoy the season. Here are a few more tips that can help you keep your sense of balance during the holidays when stress threatens to take over the show:

- Be gentle on yourself, and give yourself permission to say "No"... It really is okay to take special time for yourself. If the holidays have you feeling down for whatever reason, indulge in the things that make you feel happy, whether they're holiday related or not.
- Seek out positive people who make you feel better, and avoid people who add to your stress or contribute to your depression.

- Regain a sense of control by scheduling no more than one or two manageable goals per day, even if they're as simple as writing a few cards or cleaning a small section of a room. The satisfaction of completing these tasks can add to your sense of well-being and help you get everything done, over a longer period of time.
- If a certain tradition causes more stress and discomfort than joy, give yourself permission to do things differently! Remind yourself that there is no right or wrong way to celebrate Christmas. Ban the word "should."
- Focus on what you and your family want to do for the holidays instead of what other families are doing.
- Take advantage of online shopping instead of rushing through malls, make homemade gifts, or give gifts of service, such as volunteering or cooking meals.
- If the thought of cooking Christmas dinner gives you a headache, arrange to have friends and family over to help you cook ahead of time or hold a potluck dinner instead.
- Make a concerted effort to realign the focus of the holiday to reflect your spiritual or ethical beliefs rather than commercial values. You may need to discuss how you and your family will do this, as it can take many forms depending on your beliefs.