

Bulletin #9022, Staying Warm in an Unheated House

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Staying Warm in an Unheated House

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During severe winter storms, your home heating system could be inoperative for as long as several days. To minimize discomfort and possible health problems during this time, conserve body heat by dressing warmly; find or improvise an alternative heat source, such as a fireplace or electric space heater with a tip-over switch; confine heating to a single room; and keep safety a foremost consideration. While chances of freezing to death in your home are small, there's a greater danger of death by fire, lack of oxygen or carbon monoxide poisoning

Think “Safety First”

Safety is critical in a heating emergency. Follow these precautions:

- **All homes should have battery-operated smoke and CO (carbon monoxide) detectors with alarms installed.** Check batteries regularly.
- **Do not burn anything larger than candles inside your home without providing good ventilation to the outside.**
- **Any type of heater (except electric) should be vented.** Connect the stovepipe to a working chimney flue only. (Many older homes have capped pipe thimbles in rooms once heated by stoves.)

- **If you chose a catalytic or unvented heater, cross-ventilate:** open a window an inch on each side of the room. It is better to let in some cold air than to run the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.
- **“Space” heaters need their space.** Keep anything combustible at least three feet away. Never refill a space heater while it is in operation or still hot.
- **Only refuel heaters outdoors!** Use the type of fuel recommended by the manufacturer and follow instructions carefully.
- **Children should not have access to portable heaters,** either electric or fuel powered.
- **Do not use a gas or electric oven or surface units for heating.** A gas oven may go out or not burn well, leading to carbon monoxide poisoning. An electric oven is not designed for space heating.
- **Do not burn outdoor barbecue materials** such as charcoal briquettes inside—even in a fireplace. Charcoal briquettes can release odorless, but toxic, carbon monoxide fumes and can cause death.
- **Do not try to use bottled gas in natural gas appliances unless you have converted the appliances for such use.** Also, flues and piping made for gas-burning appliances may be unsafe for use with higher-temperature oil, coal or wood smoke.
- **Have one person watch for fire whenever an alternative heat source is used.** One person should also stay awake to watch for fire and make sure ventilation is OK. If you feel drowsy or have a headache, it may be a sign of poor ventilation.
- **Keep firefighting materials on-hand.** These include: dry powder fire extinguishers, a tarp or heavy blanket, sand, salt, baking soda, and water.

Conserve Body Heat

Put on extra clothing. If cold is severe, your bed may be the warmest place. Use extra blankets and coverings to trap body heat; this is an especially good way to keep children warm. Farm families might consider taking refuge in a warm livestock barn.

Find or Improvise an Alternative Heat Source

You may have alternative heating resources around your home. Possibilities include:

- fireplace, space heater, catalytic camp stove
- wood, gas or oil heater
- gas-fired hot water heater

Make sure you have a backup plan if you can't find a safe way to stay warm. Staying with relatives or going to a designated shelter might be an option.

Provide Fuel

Some common materials that could be used for fuel in an emergency include:

- firewood, rolled newspaper logs
- kerosene
- woodchips, straw, corncobs

Glass doors or metal screens should be placed in front of a fireplace to prevent sparks or hot ash from igniting carpets, furniture or other combustibles.

You can burn coal (not charcoal) in a fireplace or stove if you make a grate to hold it, and allow air to circulate underneath. “Hardware cloth” screening placed on a standard wood grate will keep coal from falling through. Tightly rolled newspapers and magazines can be used as paper “logs.” Stack them as you would firewood to allow for air circulation. If the heating situation becomes critical, consider burning wood, including unfinished lumber. Do not burn pressure-treated wood or finished furniture. Some plywood and manufactured woods may release toxins.

Select a Room to be Heated

Close off all rooms except the one to be heated. When choosing a room, consider the following:

- If you’re using a vented stove or space heater, select a room with a stove or chimney flue.
- Confine emergency heat to a small area.
- Choose a room on the “warm” side of the house, away from prevailing winds. Avoid rooms with large windows or uninsulated walls. Interior bathrooms probably have the lowest air leakage and heat loss. Your basement may be a warm place in cold weather because the earth acts as insulation and cuts heat loss.
- Isolate the room from the rest of the house by keeping doors closed, hanging bedding or heavy drapes over doorways, or putting up temporary partitions of cardboard or plywood.

Generators

Portable generators are often used to restore electricity to some home appliances during a power outage. Power from a generator can be a lifesaver, but it can also be very dangerous if not used properly. If you choose this option to restore power, please take the following safety tips into consideration:

- **NEVER use a generator indoors!** Generators must be set up outdoors in a completely open and dry area.
- **Position the generator away from vents, windows, and doors** to prevent carbon monoxide from building up and entering the home.
- **Do not use a generator in rain or wet conditions.**
- **It’s best to plug appliances directly into the generator**, or a heavy-duty, outdoor-rated extension cord may also be used. Make sure that the cord is free of cuts or tears, and the plug has all three prongs-especially a grounding pin.

- **NEVER try to power the house wiring by plugging the generator into a wall outlet.** This practice, known as “backfeeding,” is extremely dangerous as it presents an electrocution risk to utility workers and neighbors served by the same utility transformer. It also bypasses some of the built-in household circuit protection devices.
- **Turn the generator off and let it cool down before refueling.** Gasoline spilled on hot engine parts could cause a fire.
- **Always follow the manufacturer’s instructions** for your generator. Give special attention to how much wattage your generator can accommodate so that it does not overload and malfunction.

Sources:

“Staying Warm in an Unheated House: Coping With a Power Outage in Winter,” University of Wisconsin Extension, 1996. Reviewed by John W. Donovan, Extension educator.

“Winter Storms, safety tips for heating your home,” Texas A & M University, December 2005, <http://texashelp.tamu.edu/011-disaster-by-stage/prepare/safety-tips-heating-homes.php>.

For more information on emergency preparedness, contact your UMaine Extension county office.

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