

Safety Tips for the Holidays



WASHTENAW COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

As the holiday season approaches and the blistery weather rolls in, our thoughts turn to friends and loved ones. Many people will host everything from small dinners to lavish parties to celebrate this special time of year. Malls and shopping centers will be packed with wall-to-wall people and those that prey on them as well. To ensure that these events remain safe and merry, there are a few things we can all do around the home and while we are out shopping.

Sleigh Rides

Every morning you wake up and notice that it's another frigid Michigan winter with blowing snow and near negative temperatures. Many of us are guilty of starting our vehicles and then running back into our homes allowing the car to warm up before leaving for work. Unfortunately our local car thieves know this too and love to look for those cars that are running without anyone in them. It doesn't take any thief long to get into a running vehicle with keys in them. Besides stealing your car, most people have home and other keys as well on their key chain and now you have to worry about potential burglaries.

Try to invest in an automatic car starter, use another set of keys so you can lock your car while it runs, or never leave your vehicle unattended when running. This prevents you from filing a stolen vehicle report, trying to find another way to work, and a potential burglary in the future.

During your holiday shopping, try not to leave anything in your vehicle that will allow anyone to peer into it and identify anything about you (i.e. where you live, where you work, who you are, etc...).

Many of us go from one store to another and use our cars as a quick storage. Don't leave presents out in plain view where thieves know exactly what great items you just purchased. Maybe they couldn't get the latest and greatest toy that you were able to or it would just be easier to break into your car and sell those items cheaper on the street to others. If you do store your gifts in the car, try to lock it up in the trunk or make sure they are covered up.

As you walk out to your car from a long fun filled day of shopping remember to always be aware of your surroundings and look around. Did you park in a well illuminated area? Are your hands fill with bags and presents that will make you take longer to get to your keys? Just some extra questions that might make you think before shopping.

Deck The House

Every year millions of people put up decorations all over their homes. The end result should be festive and light, but without taking a few important precautions, it can become a nightmare.

Strings of holiday lights are put up both inside and outside to brighten up any dwelling. Unfortunately, these same lights cause a large number of fires each year. Before putting them up, you should always check on the condition of the lights. Make sure the wiring is not frayed or damaged in any way, and that none of the bulbs are broken. A set of lights that is in bad shape can be very likely to short out and start a fire. The wires that cover every string of lights provide insulation and prohibit the electrical current from getting out. When the wires are not in prime condition, it's time to dispose of that set for another. Even a newer set of lights can be a hazard, so it is never a good idea to leave them unattended. When you go out for the night or go to sleep, make sure to turn them off.



A tree makes a magnificent centerpiece for holiday

decorations, but it can also be a major hazard. Every year hundreds of fires begin in festively decorated trees. There are a few things you can do to make the tree as safe as possible. First off, mount the tree securely so it cannot tip over or be easily knocked down. A falling tree can land on someone or damage property. A dry tree can ignite far too easily. It is essential to keep the tree well watered the entire time you have it in your home - especially if you plan to place candles on or near it. Place the tree far away from the fireplace if you intend to use it, and the same goes for wrapping paper, gifts or any other holiday items that may be flammable.

Just in case there is a fire, make sure you have a charged extinguisher around the house. Let everyone who lives there know exactly where it is, and show them how to use it. Check the batteries in any smoke alarms you have in your home to be certain they are in good working condition. An alarm will immediately alert you about a dangerous situation, and will let you know to grab the fire extinguisher. One final note - holiday decorations are often used all over the house, but they should never block any exits. In case a fire does break out, you'll want to have every possible escape route free and clear.

Holiday Gatherings

Having friends and family over for the holidays can be a fun and joyous experience, but you still must be cautious and alert. A dinner party is a great way to entertain your guests, but don't neglect the food you have cooking. Another major household fire hazard is food that is placed on the stove and forgotten about. The table settings at these meals tend to be lavish, but if they include candles you may want to remove them when it's time to eat, especially if there are young children involved. All it takes is a quick bump to knock one over and catch the tablecloth on fire.



Keeping your home safe from fire is only part of the responsibilities home owners face during the holiday season. Read on to find out more about protecting your house from criminals who would take advantage of this season of giving.

Make Your House Look Occupied

Many people travel during the holiday season to visit friends and relatives. Criminals are aware of this fact and look for houses that are empty during this time of year. The last thing you want to come home to is a house that has been burglarized, so here are a few things you can do to protect your home.

The best way to keep a burglar away from your home while you are gone is to make it appear that you never left. Start by temporarily stopping the delivery of the daily mail and newspaper. When papers are allowed to pile up on the front porch or mail boxes start to overflow, criminals are alerted that people have gone out of town. Put timers on lights inside the house so they turn on every night. The same can be done for television sets will help give the appearance that people are at home. Once you have things in place to make the house look occupied, remember to do one final thing: turn off the ringer for your phone. All the work you have done to create the illusion that you are home can be shattered by a ringing phone that is never answered.

Ask a friend or relative to stop by your home periodically if you will be gone for several days. This allows them to keep an eye on the place, and will show any criminals who might be watching that someone is going inside on a regular basis. Also ask your friend to plow your driveway to help show that there is someone home. If no one is able to do this for

you, try to leave a parked car in the driveway while you are away to make it seem like someone is at home.

Burglars who think they have found an easy target can break into your home quickly. One way to discourage this is by to put up signs or stickers that state you have a working security system in place. The last thing a criminal wants is to set off an alarm, and if they see the signs the will think your home is not worth the effort.

Safety When You Are Home

Just because you don't leave home for the holidays doesn't mean your house is automatically safe. A very common holiday mistake is to make it obvious that you have expensive items still in their boxes within your living room. Of course most people would assume that every home has a variety of gifts inside during the holidays, but if a criminal can actually see them they will be far more tempted to break in. Never place wrapped gifts where they can be seen through a window. Doing so lets a criminal know exactly where everything is, and they may be inclined to break that window, grab what they can and run off.



A second part of keeping your holiday treasures hidden is to avoid putting large empty boxes in front of the house. Even if you store the gifts away from windows, the box itself will tell a burglar that you have something they may want in your home. Keep the boxes hidden until the holidays are over, and then recycle the packaging. By that point, criminals are not as active about looking for goods they may want to steal.

Don't let your holiday season be ruined by a law breaker. Make sure a criminal can never tell that you have expensive items inside, or that you have left town for a few days. Keep safe and enjoy the holiday season.

So remember:

- ✓ Don't leave your cars running unattended
 - ✓ Park in well lit areas while shopping
- ✓ Be careful with storing gifts in your car while shopping
- ✓ Be aware of your surroundings while walking out to your car
 - ✓ Are your hands full of presents
 - ✓ Are your keys easily accessible
- ✓ Before putting up lights check for frayed lines and broken bulbs
 - ✓ Are the trees mounted safely
 - ✓ Are the trees well watered
- ✓ Check fire extinguisher and have one near by
- ✓ Be careful with candles especially near paper, gifts, and other flammable materials
 - ✓ Make your home appear as someone is always home
 - ✓ Use timers on lights, radios, and televisions
- ✓ Stop the mail and newspapers (or have someone pick them up)
- ✓ Have friend or relative stop by to check on the home and possibly plow the driveway/walkway
 - ✓ Keep an extra car in the driveway while gone
- ✓ Don't leave gifts where people can see through your windows
 - ✓ Throw away the boxes after the holidays are over

From the desk of Sheriff Jerry L. Clayton