

OSHA's Unofficial Guidelines for Safe Holiday Decorating

As workplaces decorate their offices with cheer and remembrance during the holiday season, it's essential to prioritize safety to prevent this joyful time from turning tragic. Between Thanksgiving and New Year's, non-typical workplace injuries increase due to electrical hazards, decoration fires, falls caused by poor extension cord management, and hanging of or poorly placed decorations.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reports that 30% of all home fires and 38% of fire-related deaths occur during this time. According to the Electrical Safety Foundation, approximately 5,800 people visit hospital emergency rooms each year due to injuries from falls involving holiday decorations. Additionally, around 4,000 individuals seek treatment for injuries related to extension cords, with half of these injuries caused by tripping over decorations or cords.

OSHA and the National Electrical Code prohibit using extension cords as a substitute for permanent wiring. However, there is a written exception for temporary holiday decorations. These exceptions do not allow cords to be run through doorways, holes in walls, or inside drop ceilings. In a standard interpretation letter of 1910.305, OSHA told Mr. Robert Jones from FPL Energy that cords may be run through window openings for holiday decorations, provided the cords are protected from damage.

It's essential to carefully plan the routing of cords to prevent damage to their outer sheathing and to avoid creating tripping hazards. While it may be tempting to tape cords down or hide them under a rug, this could lead to serious fire hazards. Without proper attention to amperage ratings and usage design, a cord could overheat and ignite. Continuous foot traffic over a cord may also damage its internal protection, which can lead to electrical fires or electrocution. OSHA requires that temporary wiring be inspected before each use or shift, which is unlikely if cords are tucked under rugs or taped to the floor. To avoid tripping, shock, or fire hazards, use an extension cord that is long enough—without daisy-chaining—to run along the wall to the desired location, and choose a cord designed for the environment and load.

Powered outdoor decorations carry electrocution risks. Ground-fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) are designed to shut off electrical power within 1/40th of a second if electricity flows along an unintended path. They should be used in all wet areas, such as outdoors. If a GFCI is not part of the building wiring circuit, a cord-connected GFCI should be installed.

Decorations must not block or impede exit routes or exit signs. Holiday cheer should never compromise life safety codes. Holiday banners, wreaths, and trees can obstruct exit routes, hinder door hardware operations, and obscure exit signs. The clear space in front of emergency exits exists for a reason; do not fill it with decorations. If you plan to use a natural Christmas tree, remember to water it daily, as it can absorb up to two gallons in its stand. The National Institute of Standards and Technology has published a video showing how quickly a dry natural

tree can ignite, engulfing a room in under 10 seconds: <https://youtu.be/26A-49Wb2F4>. The NFPA states that between 2004 and 2008, an average of 260 home fires occurred each year due to Christmas trees. Therefore, proper placement and diligent watering of natural trees are essential to prevent them from blocking exits or forcing occupants to pass through flames in search of safety.

Most decorations require an elevated platform for hanging. This platform should be a ladder—never an office chair or bucket. Ladders are designed for specific uses. A step ladder (self-supporting) shall not be used when leaned against a wall, as the foot pads are not intended for that purpose. Extension ladders must maintain a 4:1 ratio. A leading cause of ladder injuries is the mentality of "I almost got it." If you find yourself stretching to reach, reposition the ladder or use a taller one. This approach will save time compared to a trip to the emergency room and the recovery downtime that follows.

The Illinois On-Site Safety and Health Consultation Program can be an invaluable resource for employers to review workplace practices to look for electrical hazards and verify exit route requirements. The Illinois Department of Labor will work with employers to provide recognized industry best practices, sample programs, and proven safety management methods to small and medium-sized businesses. Consultation services include on-site visits, air and noise sampling, and program assistance and training, all of which can help create a safer and healthier work environment while also potentially lowering your workers' compensation insurance premiums. This program, brought to you at no cost by the State of Illinois*, can provide the support and guidance needed to identify hazards, develop a hierarchy of controls for those hazards, and create an enduring safety and health program. Visit <https://worksafe.illinois.gov/> or contact Harry (Hap) Hileman with the Illinois Department of Labor at 217-993-2111 or harry.hileman@illinois.gov for more information.



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