



Tips to safely use natural gas and alternative heating sources

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), your residential utility consumer advocate, provides the following tips on the safe use of natural gas in homes. Also included are tips to safely use alternative heating sources in place of natural gas, use of extension cords and ways to keep your water pipes from freezing if the power goes out.

Natural gas safety

The OCC recommends that consumers become familiar with the signs of a natural gas leak and report any concerns they may have to the natural gas company or their local emergency personnel.

While natural gas service is typically reliable, consumers can help reduce the possibility of accidents or safety issues with natural gas by being aware of their surroundings. Two safety guidelines include:

- If you smell a rotten egg odor (the scent that is added to natural gas) or hear the hiss of a leaking pipeline, leave the house immediately and call either your local fire department (9-1-1 in most areas) or your natural gas company.
- In some instances if the leak is in a pipeline outside your home you may see an area in your yard where the vegetation has died, water is bubbling or dirt is blowing, leave the house immediately and call either your local fire department (9-1-1 in most areas) or your natural gas company.

Alternative heating sources

During the winter when the electricity is out, many people turn to alternative heating sources, such as generators, gas or kerosene heaters and fireplaces. While these are viable options to help stay warm, there are several safety tips that should be followed to ensure that no harm comes to you or your family.

Gas stoves and carbon monoxide

First, natural gas stoves and ranges should not be used as a heating source. This is due to the danger of carbon monoxide build up in the home. Carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless gas that can be fatal when breathed. Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are similar to the flu, making it difficult to diagnose at first. Low levels of exposure can cause nausea, dizziness, muscle aches and weakness. Exposure at higher levels can cause severe to permanent health problems. If it is suspected that there is any level of carbon monoxide in the home, residents should leave immediately and call the fire department from a neighbor's house.

One safety tip that applies to natural gas usage as well as alternative heating sources is to make sure that the house is equipped with both smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. Most carbon monoxide detectors come with an option for battery backup so they continue to work even when the electricity is off.

Generators

There are several different types of generators available for consumers to use in the event of a power outage. The type you purchase may depend on price, type of fuel to run the generator and how often you expect to have to use it. When purchasing a generator, talk with a salesperson about what you anticipate using it for, such as running appliances, lamps, sump pumps or home security systems. No matter which type you buy or how you are using it, there are several safety tips you should follow.

- To avoid carbon monoxide poisoning you should never use the generator inside the home or in an attached garage. It should be operated outside in a well-ventilated area and protected from the elements.
- Never exceed the rated capacity of your generator.

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- Start the generator with the largest appliance first, then add additional items one at a time.
- Choose the appropriate extension cord for the appliance or items you are running.

Kerosene and gasoline heaters

- Always choose a heater that has the latest safety standards built in, such as an automatic shut-off device in the event that the heater tips over.
- Make sure that there is a guard around the burner in kerosene heaters to avoid fires.
- Keep all heaters on a level, hard and nonflammable surface.
- At least three feet should be kept between bedding or drapes and a heater.
- Always turn the heater off when leaving the room.
- Always fill the heater outside of the home and only after it is cool.

Never use gasoline in a kerosene heater or kerosene in a gasoline heater. Even small amounts of these substances mixed together substantially increases the risk of a fire or explosion. Also, always store kerosene in a container intended for kerosene and store in a well-ventilated space, preferably away from the house.

Fireplaces

- Make sure that wood stoves and fireplaces are installed according to building codes.
- Have the chimney cleaned and inspected yearly to build up from catching fire.
- Avoid using coal, charcoal, trash or paper wrappings in a fireplace. These items can emit carbon monoxide or other dangerous fumes. Also, paper embers



could ignite the roof.

- Use a screen or glass enclosure to prevent sparks or embers from igniting flammable objects.

Extension cord safety

When shopping for extension cords to use around the house, make sure you buy the appropriate type for the job for which it will be used. For example, certain cords are made to be used outdoors and will withstand rain and snow. Also, not all extension cords are made to handle the wattage needed to run appliances in the home.

For most household uses a No. 16 gauge cord or larger (preferably a No. 12 gauge cord) and a plug that is polarized (one blade wider than the other) is recommended. This will help avoid overheating of the cord and lower the risk of electric shock. When looking for extension cords, remember the smaller the gauge number, the larger the amount of electricity the cord can handle. Check with your local home improvement or hardware store for special, heavy-duty extension cords for higher wattage appliances.

Water pipes – prevent freezing

Since water expands as it freezes, it puts pressure on the pipes in which it flows. This can cause the pipes to break. Here are tips on how to prevent pipes from freezing and what to do if your pipes freeze.

Preventing frozen pipes

You can prevent water pipes from freezing by following these recommendations:

- Insulate both hot and cold water pipes in the home. This can help the pipes stay warmer longer and prevent them from freezing quickly.
- Consider installing specific products made to insulate water pipes like a “pipe sleeve” or installing UL-listed “heat tape on pipes that are exposed or susceptible to

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freezing.

During very cold weather or power outages

- Open cabinet doors that lead to plumbing to allow warmer air to circulate around the pipes.
- When the weather is very cold outside, let the cold water drip from the faucet served by pipes that are susceptible to freezing. Running water through the pipe - even at a trickle - helps prevent pipes from freezing because the temperature of the water running through them is above freezing.

To thaw frozen pipes

- If you turn on a faucet and only a trickle comes out, first make sure your main water valve is turned on. If it is on, then you may have a frozen pipe. Locate the frozen area of the water pipe. Likely places include pipes running against exterior walls or where your water service enters your home through the foundation.
- Keep the faucet open. As you treat the frozen pipe and the frozen area begins to melt, water will begin to flow through the frozen area. Running water through the pipe will help melt more ice in the pipe.
- Apply heat to the frozen section of pipe using an electric heating pad wrapped

around the pipe, electric hair dryer, a portable space heater (kept away from flammable materials), or wrapping pipes with towels soaked in hot water. Make sure electrical devices do not come into contact with water.

- Do not use a blowtorch, kerosene or propane heater, charcoal stove or other devices with an open flame to heat the pipe – these can make the water boil and cause the pipe to explode. Also, open flames present a serious fire hazard, as well as a severe risk of exposure to lethal carbon monoxide.

If you have broken pipes

- Check all other faucets in your home to find out if you have additional frozen pipes. If one pipe freezes, others may freeze, too.
- Make sure you and your family knows how to shut off the water in case a pipe bursts.
- Call a licensed plumber to make the necessary repairs.



The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts. The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues and resolves complaints from individuals. To receive utility information, brochures, schedule a presentation or file a utility complaint, residential consumers may call 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) toll free in Ohio or visit the OCC Web site at www.pickocc.org.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.

For additional information from the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel:

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