

Are You Ready for Winter

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is the first in a series of articles that will appear occasionally from the Bollinger County Emergency Responders

Stay warm, protect your pets, and keep a few tips in mind if you have a disability or medical condition.

Old Man winter is unpredictable. Some years have days of mild weather with minimal snow and ice. In other years, winter wallops us with blizzards, power outages and treacherous conditions. No matter the forecast, preparation is crucial for winter home safety. These tips cover carbon monoxide, heating equipment, insulation, inspections, life-sustaining equipment, pets and much more to help our family stay safe and warm all winter.

Follow these nine basic steps to stay safe at home this winter. Let us break them down:

1. **Check your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.** Test them to ensure they work. If your models use replaceable batteries, change the batteries now rather than wait for them to run low. Get new **smoke detectors** if they are more than 10 years old and replace **carbon monoxide detectors** that are more than five years old. Make an evacuation plan and ensure that everyone in the household knows to get outside and stay outside if a detector goes off. Conduct a drill with your family to practice your plan.
2. **Get your chimney, fireplace, furnace, water heater, and roof inspected (and cleaned, if needed).** Chimneys and fireplaces account for nearly three in every 10 fires caused by home heating equipment, and carbon monoxide poisoning can result from blocked flues and chimneys.
3. **Practice safe heating and ventilation.** Keep a three-foot zone clear around heating equipment, especially if children are in the home. Do not keep anything flammable or combustible within three feet of heating equipment. Turn your space heaters and other portable devices off when you leave a room or go to sleep. Avoid using your oven to heat the house. Gas ovens can result in carbon monoxide poisoning. Electric ovens are slightly safer, but they can still malfunction and cause a fire if they are left on for hours. Your electricity bill is liable to skyrocket, too. Ovens simply **are not** meant to heat homes. Here are some other safe heating tips:
 - Use only manufacturer-recommended fuels in fuel-burning space heaters.
 - Use durable fireplace screens to keep embers from shooting around the room. Check that ashes are cool before you dispose of them.
 - Blow out candles when you leave the room or go to sleep. Keep a 12-inch space clear around them, and use sturdy candle holders that will not tip over. Keep flashlights, battery-powered candles, or other battery-powered devices on hand in case of power outages so you do not have to rely on candles. Avoid candles altogether if someone in your home uses oxygen.
 - Clean your heating equipment. Dirty equipment causes about a quarter of home heating equipment fires.¹
4. **Insulate or winterize water hoses, sprinkler systems, pipes, and attics.** Keep your house heat at 55 degrees Fahrenheit or higher to avoid burst pipes. Disconnect garden hoses, and drain sprinkler systems and outdoor faucets.

5. **Choose ergonomic snow shovels that lessen the burden on your back and arms.** You should be good to go if your shovel is lightweight, has comfortable handles, and lets you stand up straight. To reduce the strain on your body, shovel every few hours (ideally as snow falls) rather than doing all the snow at once.
6. **Prep home, vehicle, and pet emergency kits in case of power outage, heat loss, or other crises.** Include these supplies in your home kit: Two-way radio (hand cranked, battery-powered, or solar-powered), cellphone charger (solar-powered or hand-cranked), flashlights, lanterns, batteries, clothing, blankets, hand and foot warmers, and a minimum of three days' water, medications, and nonperishable food. In your pet kit, include a few days' worth of food and water and blankets to keep them warm. Make an evacuation plan for your pet well in advance: find out if you can bring your pet with you to a shelter, hotel, or relative's home in case of evacuation. If not, who can temporarily take the pet in? Additional supplies to keep handy in case of an evacuation include ID tags, your contact information, pet carrier, leash, and proof of ownership (a picture of you with the pet, for example). Microchip your pet for extra security. When packing vehicle emergency kits, think about supplies such as socks, hats, mittens, and blankets, snow brush, ice scraper, jumper cables, flashlight, and batteries (or choose a hand-crank flashlight). It is also great to keep a Swiss Army knife, windshield cleaner, reflective warning triangles, first aid kit, nonperishable food, and bottled water in your car in the winter.
7. **Know where to go and what to do in case an emergency occurs.** For instance, find the cold weather shelters in your area and arrange for friends to watch your pets if necessary. Establish contact with various service companies ahead of time in case you eventually require someone to clear your snow, fix frozen pipes, or repair your roof.
8. **Maintain backup items if you use medically necessary or life-sustaining equipment.** Based on your conditions, could you need a power generator, prescription refills, or a manual wheelchair in case you cannot charge your electric wheelchair? Plan for these items in advance of power outages and storms. If necessary, contact your power utility to get priority status as a customer who uses life-sustaining equipment.
9. **Use outdoor lighting that works from afar.** The days grow shorter in winter, but you do not have to struggle or slip in the dark. Outdoor lighting options include smart bulbs, motion sensors, and photocells (photocells work based on changing light levels). You can mix and match, perhaps using motion sensors for stairways, and both photocells and motion sensors for floodlights, security, and pathway lights. Smart bulbs allow you to turn lights on and off remotely whenever you want or according to a set schedule. They also come in handy to create the illusion you are home when you are not. If you do not have the budget to change your lighting setup, simply ensure that your outdoor lights work and that the fixtures are secure each winter.



Please help protect your family and your property. If you need help, dial 9-1-1 - fire, law enforcement and EMS. Seconds count in an emergency!