

Dec. 1, 2003 – FOR HOLIDAY RELEASE

HIGHLIGHTS:

With the holidays upon us, risks for children increase. “The highest incidence of household injuries occur at party times and during times of increased family activity,” says Kate Perkins, M.D., Ph.D., Medical Director of the Children’s Health Clinic at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Regardless of the holiday you’re celebrating, it’s in your children’s best interest for you to be aware of risks and more importantly, of how to prevent accidents.

FROM CANDLES TO CANDY, ORNAMENTS TO ALLERGIES, THE HOLIDAYS SERVE UP SPECIAL RISKS FOR KIDS – 14 TIPS FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM HOLIDAY HAZARDS

LOS ANGELES (Dec. 1, 2003) – It’s ironic that even as the holidays approach – with all their fun and festivities – risks for children increase. “The highest incidence of household injuries occur at party times and during times of increased family activity,” says Kate Perkins, M.D., Ph.D., Medical Director of the Children’s Health Clinic at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

“During the holidays and especially at party times, kids are excited and parents are distracted,” adds Lloyd Brown, M.D., Associate Director of the Pediatrics Residency Training Program at Cedars-Sinai, and Medical Director of the C.O.A.C.H. for Kids Program. “Kids are home from school and reacting with lots of energy and excitement to the magic of the season. Whether you’re celebrating Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas or any other holiday, it’s in your children’s best interest for you to be aware of special risks and of how to prevent accidents.” Following are tips for protecting kids this holiday season.

1. Candles – Virtually all of the major autumn and winter holidays, including Hanukkah, Thanksgiving and Christmas, include candles in the decorations or services. Because little ones are attracted by candles and fire, take extra precautions to be sure these items are out of reach of climbing toddlers who might be burned by the flame or the hot wax, or may even start a house fire by tipping the candles over. And never hold a candle while carrying a baby.
2. Ornaments – Many holiday ornaments and decorations are made of glass which can break and cut tiny fingers or even be ingested. In addition, many ornaments are “miniaturized,” which means they can pose a choking hazard to little ones. Even ornament hooks can come off and be swallowed. Be sure to place small or breakable ornaments high enough to be out of reach of children. If it’s a tree you’re decorating, put the larger, unbreakable ornaments on the lower branches.

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3. Fireplaces – It just seems like holiday tradition for the family to gather around a snapping fireplace. Never leave children alone in a room with a burning fire, and be sure to keep a sturdy screen in place that will help prevent toddlers from falling into it. Also, have a screen that won't fall on top of your child if he or she grabs it. Avoid burning gift-wrapping paper in the fireplace – it can ignite very quickly resulting in a “flash” fire. Be sure the fire is completely out before leaving the house or going to bed at night. Make sure, too that your fireplace and chimney are clean and in good working order so that smoke does not enter the house, which could result in the build-up of deadly carbon monoxide.
4. Trees – A holiday tree is almost irresistible to small children. Because it is so attractive, they may try climbing it and inadvertently pull it over onto themselves. Be sure the tree is stable. If it is a real tree, be sure it is well hydrated to reduce fire danger. And when you go to bed at night or leave the house, be sure the lights are off.
5. Allergies – If your child has food allergies, it pays to be extra vigilant during the holidays, and to let your hosts know ahead of time so they don't offer foods to which your child is allergic. Because many holiday treats, candies and breads served at parties contain nuts or nut products, your child can inadvertently consume foods that may result in a severe reaction. For example, your child who is allergic to peanuts may be unaware that the fudge she is given at a party contains peanut butter, or that the deep-fried turkey was actually fried in peanut oil. Many children who have severe reactions to peanuts don't even know ahead of time that they are allergic, so be aware of the signs of a severe allergic reaction (wheezing, trouble breathing, severe itching of the nose and throat, swelling of the area around the eyes), and contact a physician immediately or call 911 if you believe your child may be suffering from a severe allergic reaction, also called anaphylaxis.
6. Foods – Hard candies, nuts, veggie sticks, hot dogs and other holiday treats present major choking risks for children – and they are often found at parties and other holiday festivities.
7. Holiday Visiting – If you take your children to holiday parties or to visit friends or relatives, keep a close eye on them until you can ascertain whether the home you are visiting is “child proofed.” Make sure the home has appropriate cabinet and toilet seat latches, etc. If visitors come to your home, remind them to keep these items latched – and then check to make sure they do.
8. Parties – Be sure to clean up promptly after hosting a party. If your child gets up during the night or before you do the next morning, he could choke on leftover foods or even drink or eat leftover alcohol or tobacco. And be sure to discard balloons right away. Balloons that are broken or not inflated can pose a choking hazard to youngsters age 8 and younger.
9. Emergency contacts – Laminate a list containing all of the important emergency phone numbers you or your babysitter might need. This list should include the phone numbers of your pediatrician and the poison control center, as well as the police, fire department and ambulance. It should also contain the cell phone numbers of both parents.
10. Holiday shopping – Remember that malls, theme parks and other areas are particularly crowded during the holidays, and children can easily wander away to look at the attractive lights and decorations. Be sure to hold tightly to your child's hand and/or keep your child in your vision at all times.

11. Water safety – Believe it or not, pool and water safety are particularly important during the holidays, if you live in a warm-weather climate. Parents and caregivers are often distracted with holiday preparations and less watchful of their children at this time of year, and visitors to the home may forget to close pool gates or doors that are typically kept locked, As a result, children can get into areas to which they don't normally have access and can drown.
12. Gifts and toys – Be sure that all toys and gifts are age-appropriate for your child. Before allowing your child to play with a new toy, read the instructions and show her how to use it properly. Be aware that holiday gift wrapping, including paper and plastic bags, ribbons and bows, etc., can present choking or strangulation risks.
13. Poisoning – Poisonings involving common products in use in the home (cleaning agents, cosmetics, plants, pain relief medications, cold medications) are much more likely to occur during any time of parental distraction, including the holidays. Be attentive to your child and careful to keep all chemicals and medicines locked up and out of reach at all times, but especially during the holiday season when you're more likely to be distracted by cooking, parties, and guests, etc.
14. Motor vehicle accidents – Motor vehicle accidents are the number one cause of death in children. If you're planning to travel this holiday season, be sure that your child is properly secured in an approved car seat – and that you use it every time the child is in the vehicle. Depending on where you live, kids may receive sleds, toboggans, scooters, bicycles or other riding toys as gifts. Be sure they aren't riding these toys into the streets where they can be hit by a car. Also, be sure they are wearing appropriate safety gear – including helmets.

The important thing to remember, says Dr. Perkins, is that as fun and as exciting as the holidays can be, they are also a time of chaos and extra activities, so it's easy for parents to become distracted. By making a conscious effort to be vigilant, and by taking the time to remind others of child safety techniques, you can help reduce the risks.

For more information on any of the pediatric programs at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, please call 1-800-CEDARS-1 or 1-800-233-2771.

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SOURCES: Kate Perkins, M.D., and Lloyd Brown, M.D. Cedars-Sinai Medical Center; American Academy of Pediatrics, iVillage, St. Francis Children's Hospital (Tulsa), KeepKidsHealthy.com.

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