



2880 International Circle Colorado Springs, CO 80910

Building A Better Community
Thru Education and Enforcement



“CAN WE TALK? ”

QUESTION: “WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO PUT UP THE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS?”
How many of us have been getting asked that question recently?

ANSWER: Yes it’s that time of year again, when many of us do the best we can to use as many kilowatts as possible in the next 45 days. It’s “tradition,” right up there with eating too much on Thanksgiving. I am probably as big an offender as anyone when it comes to the safety of my home and family by overloading the electric circuits in our home with Christmas lights. Many of us put as many strings of lights as possible on one undersized extension cord. You should know that, according to data from the CSFD, from 12/01/08 –01/31/2009 the Colorado Springs Fire Department responded to 5 structure fires in the city limits of Colorado Springs resulting from an electrical short or malfunction. Also U.S. fire departments responded to an estimated 52,500 reported home structure fires involving electrical failure or malfunction in 2006 (the latest published data). These fires resulted in 340 civilian deaths, 1,400 civilian injuries and \$1,447,000,000 in direct property damage. The percentage of these directly caused by Christmas lighting is not reported. However, overloading electrical wiring can obviously be very dangerous.

A little common sense will go a long way to protecting your home and family. Check every string of lights thoroughly. Look for any cracks or damage to the insulation of the wire (squirrels chew through the wires and this can cause a short). If there is any damage to the wiring replace it with a new string of lights. And make sure any extension cords used to power the lights are rated for exterior use and are heavy enough to carry the loads the combined number of lights will draw. Additionally, don’t lay extension cords in an area with foot, or any other forms of traffic that could damage the cord. When you unplug the cord at the end of the day check to see if the plug is warm. If it is, do not continue to use it for this purpose, replace it with a heavier gage extension cord.

Those old Victorian homes built in the late 1800's and early 1900's have such great architectural details that just cry out for lights to highlight all of the many rooflines. If you live in one of these homes, unless it has been totally rewired, it will have the old knob and tube type of wiring that is not very safe even without the added load of holiday lighting on the wires. Many of these and other older homes do not have GFCI (ground fault circuit interrupt) protection. You can now buy a multiple plug that has its own GFCI protection built into it. This is a good idea to help potentially over taxed electrical systems be a little safer this holiday season.

There are companies out there that will install and remove your Holiday lighting for a fee. Many of these companies are electrical contractors. Permits and inspections are not required for temporary lighting. Since I am still physically able to install my own lights, I will be getting my extension ladder and risking life and limb putting up my Christmas lights for the 34th year. It's 'Tradition' after all. Have a Safe Holiday Season!!!

By Terry R. Brunette 'Special Investigator'

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Submit your questions to: terryb@pprbd.org or mail to: Pikes Peak Regional Building Department

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