

## How to help prevent residents from overloading outlets this holiday

**Are Your Residents Trying to Beat the Griswold's This Christmas? Overloading outlets with "zillions" of Christmas lights can lead to fires. Do you have a policy or plan to engage holiday decorators that will help preserve safety without making enemies of your residents?**

And the issue of overloaded outlets obviously goes way beyond seasonal lighted decorations. Overloaded outlets are a significant cause of apartment fires across the nation each year, and winter is one of the prime times for these disasters. Faulty wiring and defective products contribute to the problem, but oftentimes it is simply a matter of trying to pull too much current from one outlet. Heat generated by electrical current can cause wiring within walls to expand and contract, which over time loosens the wire and causes arcing of electricity where it cannot be seen. That electrical activity can ignite wood, wallboard or old-style insulation and begin a fire inside walls - particularly dangerous when residents are sleeping or away from home. Circuit breakers or fuses are the "weak links in the chain" and are designed to fail first when a circuit becomes overloaded in order to shut off power. However, if the breaker fails, or if the circuit has been "over fused" to keep it operating beyond its original design, then the failure will occur elsewhere. This is also true of worn or loose connections or even extension cords that are under sized, covered (insulated) by a rug, pinched, or frayed.

Electrical fires are especially difficult to extinguish since adding water can lead to electrocution and chemical powders can fail to fully put the fire out, allowing for re-ignition. You really need the fire department, but their response time, especially in a high-rise, can mean the involvement of more than one unit, sometimes even an entire building. Smoke and water damage frequently are the result even when the fire never reaches more than one room.

In older apartments, there are often fewer outlets than are needed by today's electronically demanding society. As a result, residents purchase multi-outlet plugs, sometimes containing six or more outlets. There are at least two problems with those: (1) the power pull still originates from the one line of wire inside the wall; and (2) some of those plug adapters and extension cords are not high-quality and can cause problems of their own. It's always best to get lights, cords and adapters that are certified by UL (Underwriters Laboratories).

As a rule, the total draw from lights or appliances should be slightly less than the outlet's full capacity. Most apartment and condo outlets accommodate 15 amps, though in ultra-modern complexes, 20-amp outlets could have been installed. Make it part of your property manager's duties this week to find out what amperage your building's outlets are; then, let your residents know. Many people have no idea they could be creating a fire hazard with their holiday lights and other things plugged in and drawing electricity.

Another area of particular concern is lights and extension cords that are damaged or get damaged during use. Residents should be encouraged to inspect lamp cords and other cords from time to time. Exposed copper wiring or damaged light bulb holders increase the chance of arcing, sparking and fire. Emphasize this to residents so they pay increased attention to their light sets and extension cords. Of course, this time of year failing to water live trees causes them to dry out and become tinder even under the best lighting circumstances. Live trees should be consistently checked for moisture content and should not be lit if they are dried out.

Adorning balconies and trees with lights is a lovely way to celebrate this festive season, so apartment buildings and condominium complexes will want to make sure their safety program isn't a killjoy. But immediate attention to units that look like they are overdoing it could be necessary, so have a plan and informational bulletin in place to help prevent and address fire hazards this holiday.

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