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HEAT YOUR HOME SAFELY

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Natural gas is commonly used in homes as an energy source. And like any energy source, it must be used correctly to be efficient and safe.

Natural gas is a versatile, clean-burning fuel. It is often used to heat your home, cook food, heat water to bathe with, dry clothes, and even start the fire in the fireplace. In its natural state, it is a non-toxic, colorless, tasteless and odorless gas. The "smell" you recognize as natural gas odor is added so you will know if there is a gas leak in your home.

The gas may escape from faulty appliances, loose connections, service lines inside or outside your home, or from the gas main. If you ever smell gas, take these precautions immediately:

1. Do not light any matches or turn any electrical switches on or off in your home.
2. Ventilate the room or home by opening doors and windows.
3. If the odor is very strong or you hear a hissing noise, leave your home immediately. Go to a neighbor's home and call the fire department.

Now is also the time to inspect your furnace or boiler. A properly maintained furnace runs more efficiently and saves you money.

Follow the manufacturer's instructions to perform the inspection. If the instructions are missing, follow this checklist for inspecting your furnace or boiler:

1. Make sure the unit is free of dust, rust or any other signs of corrosion. Make sure the space around it is clear of paint, solvents, rags, paper or any other combustible products.
2. Check the air filter regularly, every one to two months. Replace or clean it if necessary. You can save 5% or more on your energy bills by doing so regularly.
3. Check the blower by thoroughly examining it and the belt (if your furnace has one) for cracks or excessive wear. Replace it if necessary.
4. Inspect space heaters annually as well. As with any gas appliance, trouble signs to look for are: a yellow flame; soot; a lingering pungent smell; or overheating.

Many homes have gas appliances in the kitchen and laundry rooms. A few simple precautions will make safety easy there too. Never use the top burners or oven of a gas range for home-heating purposes. Ranges and ovens are designed as cooking appliances only. Used improperly, they present a fire and burn hazard, and a malfunctioning gas range can produce toxic carbon monoxide.

Gas clothes dryers also need to be checked periodically. Make sure the dryer vent hose is free of lint. Lint buildup in the hose can cause a fire. Check the manufacturer's instructions for information on how to remove lint from the hose, or call a qualified appliance repair contractor.

Even if everything appears to be in working order, it makes good safety sense to have all your gas appliances and furnace checked by a qualified heating contractor on a regular basis (annually is recommended).