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Tips to keep you warm and safe this winter

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Citizen reporter

Winter brings with it a desire to snuggle up in the comfort of our homes. Fireplaces, gas and electric heaters, electric blankets, and hot water bottles become our trusted companions during these chilly months. And, of course, many of us rely on generators and inverters to keep the heat turned up when the power's out.

However, it's crucial to prioritise safety. Wynand van Vuuren, client experience partner at King Price Insurance, shares some vital tips to keep your home and family warm and safe this winter.

▶ **Generators:** Never use a generator indoors. While generators should be kept covered and dry in order to prevent shocks and short circuits, they should always be installed in well-ventilated areas that are a safe distance from all the buildings on your property. Generators must be installed by professionals, and you should get a certificate of compliance once the installation is complete. Always allow a generator to cool down before refuelling it, to prevent fuel spills from igniting.

▶ **Gas heaters:** Beware of "dirty gas" sold by rogue fillers who use unauthorised filling methods and products, often involving dangerous substances like jet fuel.

This not only poses significant safety risks, it can also damage your heater's regulators, appliances, and rubber components.

Always buy gas from reputable suppliers and check the dates on the cylinders to ensure that they've been tested recently. When summer rolls around, store your gas cylinders upright with their safety caps on.

▶ **Electric heaters:** Keep heaters, both gas and electric, away from flammable objects such as curtains, furniture, and bedding, and don't drape washing over heaters to dry. Never leave a heater unattended. Turning electric heaters off when not in use isn't only kinder to your electricity bill, it's also safer, especially if you have children and pets.

▶ **Electric blankets:** Your electric blankets should have been stored flat during summer. Before using them, check for frayed cords, exposed wires, and signs of wear and tear, and dispose of them if anything seems less than perfect. Follow the manufacturer's guidelines for proper usage, maintenance, and recommended temperature settings. Always unplug electric blankets when not in use or when going to bed, and don't layer them.

▶ **Open fires:** Ensure that your chimney is clean and free from blockages. Use protective screens in front of wood-burning stoves, fireplaces, and fire pits.

▶ **Hot water bottles:** Even the humble hot water bottle can be dangerous.

Before use, inspect the bottle for wear and cracks, and replace it if it seems damaged. A leaking bottle can cause serious burns, as can a bottle that comes into direct contact with the skin.

Generators, heaters, and fires all present a risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. This invisible, odourless gas can be deadly to both humans and pets, with symptoms that include headaches, dizziness, weakness, upset stomach, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion.

Proper ventilation is crucial to prevent this gas from accumulating.

"Now's a good time to make a cup of hot chocolate, grab a cosy blankie, and read through your insurance Ts and Cs, to check what is and isn't covered in case of an accident. If in doubt, chat to your insurer," says Van Vuuren.

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