

## Christmas decorating a dangerous endeavor

3 serious falls in area show risks in hanging lights, experts say

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By JENNIFER EMILY / The Dallas Morning News

Christmas is the season of giving. It's also a time of falling and trips to the emergency room.

In the last week, one man has died and two others have been paralyzed after tumbling from ladders or step stools while decorating their North Texas homes with lights.

Injuries from falling are similar to those from car wrecks, said Paul Pepe, director of emergency medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center and Parkland Memorial Hospital.

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NATHAN HUNSINGER/DMN  
Jose Lopez of DFWLights.com secures Christmas lights on a Flower Mound home. Company owner John Hester says he only hires workers who are used to a roof's height and pitch.

"Gravity is not your friend," said Dr. Pepe, professor of public health and surgery at the medical center. "And when you start getting up 10 feet, gravity is definitely not your friend."

Morris "Dale" Alexander, 67, fell Tuesday night from a stepladder on his third-floor Dallas apartment balcony. Days earlier in Tarrant County, 50-year-old Jacob Rodriguez of Grapevine and 19-year-old Michael Rodriguez of Saginaw were paralyzed after falling off ladders at their homes while hanging lights. The two are not related.

During the holiday season, two or three people are treated in U.S. emergency rooms every hour for decorating-related falls, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Men outnumber women in such falls nearly 3-to-2.

Most victims tumble from ladders, but furniture, porches and stairs are other culprits. During the holidays, people ages 20 to 49 make up two-thirds of falls.

Dr. Pepe said that on Wednesday he treated four people for decorating accidents within hours. Common

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NATHAN HUNSINGER/DMN  
Carlos Sanchez (top) and Jose Lopez put Christmas lights on the roof of a home in Flower Mound. They work for DFWLights, a professional installation company.

injuries are severe blunt trauma, broken bones, bleeding in the brain and other internal injuries.

Both paralyzed men are at Harris Methodist Fort Worth Hospital.

"The reality is, they will likely not walk," said David Smith, chief of trauma surgery at the hospital.

Michael Rodriguez cracked several lumbar vertebrae Friday, and Jacob Rodriguez has similar injuries from a Saturday accident. Dr. Pepe, who is not involved in their care, said their injuries are "textbook" after falls.

"The ladder slipped, and I probably fell a good 15, 20 feet to the ground," said Michael Rodriguez, who builds greenhouses for a living. "The doctor said I was lucky I didn't break my neck."

Jacob Rodriguez, a computer technician for a bank, hangs lights on his home every year.

He said that his wife tells him every year to hire people to put up the lights, and that all he remembers of the accident is falling backward.

Both men say they'll hire professionals next year.

Mr. Alexander's death while decorating for Christmas isn't the first this holiday season:

- A 59-year-old California man fell to his death Sunday while hanging Christmas lights on his house. He had been on a ladder, but authorities aren't sure what caused the fall.
- In England, a 74-year-old man died in late November while putting up lights inside a town hall. He fell from a ladder and then down a flight of stairs.

John Hester, who owns a professional Christmas light installation company, said the most common mistake he sees is a lack of attention to safety.

"Most people who get hurt don't have the right equipment," Mr. Hester said.

Too many people use footstools or household ladders instead of industrial-sized ladders while decorating their roofs, he said. Also, most people aren't used to climbing on top of roofs. Mr. Hester also runs a roofing and gutter company and only hires employees who are used to the height and pitch of roofs.

"They can take the hazard out of their hands," Mr. Hester said of how companies like his can help people. "It's us on the roof taking the risk."

*WFAA-TV (Channel 8) contributed to this report.*