

# Fire



## Preventing fires in the home

**Advice for older people**

In association with



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Leaflets are free of charge and available from the Information Resources Team at the address on the back page, email [adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk](mailto:adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk) or fax 0870 770 3282.

Thanks to Surrey Fire & Rescue Service, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), the National Community Fire Safety Centre and the Electrical Safety Council for their help in writing and updating this leaflet.

If you would like this leaflet in another format, such as large print or audio tape, please contact the Information Resources Team on **020 7278 1114**.

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**House fires are often caused by a single moment of carelessness – a chip pan left unattended or a heater placed too close to the bedclothes. It is important for us all to be aware of possible fire hazards around the home and to take sensible precautions to protect ourselves and our homes.**

## **In the kitchen**

Many house fires start in the kitchen. Here are some things you can do to make a fire in the kitchen less likely.

- Keep an eye on the cooker when it is switched on. Be especially careful not to leave a chip pan, frying pan or grill pan unattended as fat can catch fire very quickly if it gets too hot. If you are called away from the kitchen, turn the cooker off until you get back; remove any pans from the heat and place them to one side.
- Before frying food, dry it off with kitchen paper or a clean tea-towel to prevent the hot fat splashing when you put the food in the pan. Never put food in the pan if the oil begins to give off smoke. Turn off the heat and leave the oil to cool or it could catch fire.
- A deep-fat fryer with an electric thermostat is much safer than a chip pan. Or you could switch to oven chips! If you do use a chip pan or deep-fat fryer, don't overfill it. Never fill the pan more than one-third full of fat.
- If your chip pan or frying pan does catch fire, try to stay calm. **Don't take any risks** – get everyone out of your home and call the fire and rescue service. **Never pour water on to the pan and never try to move the pan while it is hot.** Turn off the heat under the pan if it's safe to do so and allow

it to cool completely. Always call the fire and rescue service, even if the fire appears to be out.

- Make sure that you place pans safely on the cooker. Handles should not stick out into the room or over a lighted burner.
- If you are wearing loose clothing take care when leaning over the cooker, particularly over lit gas rings.
- Don't dry tea-towels over the cooker.
- Switch appliances off at the socket when you are not using them. Always check that all the rings and burners on your cooker have been turned off.

## Smoking

- Don't smoke if you are feeling tired and don't smoke in bed as this is extremely dangerous.
- While sitting down, place your cigarette or pipe in the ashtray between puffs, in case you fall asleep.
- Never tap hot ash into a waste-paper basket. Instead, always use a deep, heavy ashtray and place it where it cannot be knocked over.
- Make sure you stub each cigarette out properly. Never leave one burning in the ashtray. Never leave a cigarette or pipe unattended.
- At the end of the day, wet the ash and cigarette butts under a tap and throw them away into a safe container such as a metal waste-bin.
- Never fill a lighter whilst smoking.

## Heaters

The careless use of heaters can cause fires. Here are some suggestions to help you heat your home safely.

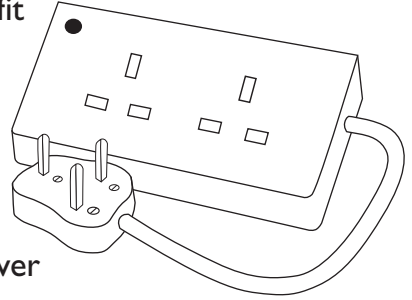
- Always place heaters away from bed clothes, curtains, furniture and main walkways, in a position where they cannot easily be knocked over.
- Take extra care when using paraffin heaters. Fill them out of doors and never fill or move them once they are lit.
- Change gas heater cylinders outside or in a well ventilated room and away from naked flames.
- Keep all fires and heaters well guarded. If you have pets, or if children visit your home, you may want to secure paraffin and gas heaters and place extra guards round them.
- Use a fireguard in front of an open fire.
- Never dry washing close to any heater or cooker or on a fireguard in front of a fire.
- Make sure chimneys and flues in regular use are swept at least once a year.
- Be careful not to sit too close to a fire or heater as your clothes or chair could catch fire. You could also burn your legs if you fall asleep.

## Electrical wiring and appliances

Electrical wiring and appliances can become a fire hazard if they are worn out, develop a fault or are misused. Here are some ways of keeping your wiring and appliances safe.

- All electrical appliances should have a British Standard number and/or the European safety mark.

- Watch out for warning signs. If a piece of electrical equipment cuts out continually, gives off a strange smell or if the plug feels hot, switch it off immediately and get it checked. Look out for worn or taped-up cables and leads and get them replaced.
- Never overload power points. Only fit one plug in each socket. If you don't have enough sockets do not use a block adaptor – use a bar adaptor on a lead (see picture). But for appliances which use a lot of power, such as heaters, irons and kettles, never fit more than one plug in each socket.
- Make sure you read and follow the manufacturer's instructions for **electric blankets** carefully. As a general rule, you should always switch off your electric blanket before you get into bed, unless you are absolutely sure it is the type that can be left on overnight. When you are not using it, store your blanket flat or rolled – never fold it. Have it serviced at least every three years. Watch out for the danger signs of fraying, scorch marks, dampness and loose connections. If your blanket accidentally gets wet, don't use it until it is completely dry. **Never** switch it on to dry it. If your blanket is more than ten years old, you should replace it with a new one.



For more information on electrical safety in the home and garden, see our free advice leaflet *Your Safety*.

## Candles

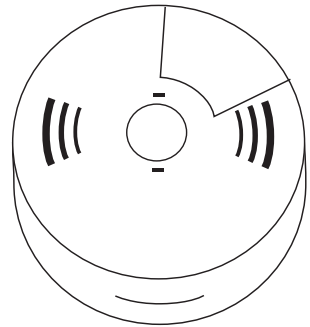
Follow these rules and any manufacturer's guidance to stay safe when using candles.

- Never leave lit candles unattended or burn them while you are asleep.

- Always use a proper holder. Don't stick a candle to a saucer with hot wax.
- Don't put candles on top of electrical appliances such as a TV – they can set light to the casing of the appliance.
- Place candles where they can't be easily knocked over, taking particular care if there are pets or children around.
- Keep candles away from draughts and flammable materials, such as curtains.
- Be especially careful using night-lights and tea-lights. They must always be placed in a heatproof container as the metal base can get hot enough to cause fires.

## Smoke alarms

Smoke alarms can give you valuable extra time to escape from a fire and may even save your life. Only buy smoke alarms marked with the British Standard number BS 5446.



- If you live in a flat or bungalow, fit the smoke alarm in the hallway between the living and sleeping areas.
- If your home has more than one level, fit one alarm at the bottom of the stairs and further alarms on each landing.

Make sure you can hear an alarm wherever you are in your home – particularly when you are asleep. If you are deaf or hard of hearing you can get special alarms with a flashing light or a vibrating pad that can be placed under your pillow or mattress at night.

Cooking fumes and steam can trigger false alarms. If you have to fit an alarm near your kitchen or bathroom, you can get ones that



have 'hush' buttons which will silence the alarm if it sounds accidentally whilst you are cooking.

If you have an alarm which often goes off accidentally, it may need moving or replacing. **Don't remove the battery: this could cost you your life.** Ask your fire and rescue service for help: they will be happy to assist you.

Test your smoke alarm weekly and keep it free from dust. Twice a year open the case of the alarm and gently vacuum it to remove dust from the sensor. If you can't open the case, vacuum through the holes instead. Take care when doing this. If you can't reach you could always ask a neighbour or a family member to help.

Change the battery at least once a year. To help you remember, always replace it on a date which means something to you, such as a birthday. Some smoke alarms give out a warning signal to indicate when the battery is running low, but don't rely on this as you could miss it. If you are worried about forgetting to change the battery, you could buy a smoke alarm fitted with special batteries that don't need replacing for ten years.

Always follow the manufacturer's instructions when you are fitting an alarm. If you find it difficult to fit the alarm by yourself, you could ask a neighbour, family member, or local voluntary organisation to help. In some areas of the UK Help the Aged runs a HandyVan home safety service which fits alarms. To find out if the service operates in your area call **01255 473999**.

Most fire and rescue services offer a Home Fire Risk Check (HFRC) where they carry out a survey of your home and give you simple advice on fire safety issues. They can also fit free smoke alarms if needed. You are entitled to a free HFRC. Contact your local fire and rescue service for details – you will find their main number in your phone book.

## Before you go to bed

By carrying out the following checks before you go to bed, you can greatly reduce the chance of a fire starting while you are asleep.

- Make sure all the burners or rings on your cooker are off.
- Check all heaters are off and place spark guards in front of open fires.
- Switch off and unplug all unused electrical appliances.
- Close all your internal doors, particularly in unoccupied rooms such as the kitchen, front room and dining room.
- Unplug your electric blanket, unless you are absolutely sure it is the type that can be left on overnight.
- Extinguish any candles that are burning, making sure they are completely out.
- Wet your ash and cigarette butts and throw away into a safe container.
- **Remember, never smoke in bed!**

For advice on smoke alarms and information on any other aspect of fire prevention, contact your local fire and rescue service. Their address and phone number will be in your phone book. Or visit the Fire Kills website at [www.firekills.gov.uk](http://www.firekills.gov.uk)

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) can also give you advice on specific fire safety problems. Write to Information Services, RoSPA, Edgbaston Park, 353 Bristol Road, Birmingham B5 7ST; tel: **0121 248 2066**; web: [www.rospace.com](http://www.rospace.com)

For further advice on electrical safety, including avoiding electrical fires, visit the Electrical Safety Council website [www.electricalsafetycouncil.org.uk](http://www.electricalsafetycouncil.org.uk)

## Be prepared!

Make sure you know your fire escape route, especially if you live in a block of flats or somewhere without direct access to the street. Keep the exits from your home clear so that you can escape if there is a fire. For tips on how to protect your home from fire go to [www.firekills.gov.uk](http://www.firekills.gov.uk)

## What to do if there is a fire in your home

- Alert other people in the building.
- Close the door on the fire.
- Get out of the house.
- Call the fire and rescue service by dialling 999 once you are out of the house.
- Make sure the fire and rescue service gets your correct address; ask them to read it back to you to be certain.
- Wait outside until the fire and rescue service arrives. Don't try to re-enter the building.

## If you can't get out of your house

- Go to a room away from the fire, ideally one facing the street.
- Close the door behind you.
- Block the foot of the door with any available materials to stop smoke spreading into the room.
- Open the window and attract attention.
- Get somebody to call the fire and rescue service and await their arrival.

## In the event of fire dial 999

**Cut this page out and pin it up**

Help the Aged produces 23 free advice leaflets (see inside for full list). These are available from the Information Resources Team at the address below, email [adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk](mailto:adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk) or fax 0870 770 3282.

For further information about smoke alarm maintenance and fire safety go to [www.firekills.gov.uk](http://www.firekills.gov.uk)

## Push the button, not your luck\*

\* Test the button once a week. If you can't reach the alarm consider asking a friend, family member or carer to test the alarm for you.

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Fighting for disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas,

### WE WILL:

**COMBAT POVERTY** wherever older people's lives are blighted by lack of money, and cut the number of preventable deaths from hunger, cold and disease

**REDUCE ISOLATION** so that older people no longer feel confined to their own home, forgotten or cut off from society

**CHALLENGE NEGLECT** to ensure that older people do not suffer inadequate health and social care, or the threat of abuse

**DEFEAT AGEISM** to ensure that older people are not ignored or denied the dignity and equality that are theirs by right

**PREVENT FUTURE DEPRIVATION** by improving prospects for employment, health and well-being so that dependence in later life is reduced

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