



Fire safety

A guide for homeowners/
occupiers and residents

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Introduction

Although fatalities have gradually been decreasing, the UK still sees a significant number of fire-related injuries and deaths each year.

Many of these injuries and deaths could be avoided by following simple safety procedures.

This guide offers basic advice about fire safety in the home. It has been written specifically with owner/occupiers and residential tenants in mind.



What are the common causes of fire?



Smoking

If you or someone in your household smokes:

- make sure cigarettes are stubbed out – carelessly discarded smoking materials are one of the biggest causes of domestic fires
- do not leave a lit cigarette or pipe lying around
- use a proper ashtray that is in a stable, secure position and made of non-combustible material and
- take care when smoking while tired as you might fall asleep and start a fire.



Vapes/e-cigarettes

If you use a vape/e-cigarette:

- only use the charger supplied with your product
- don't leave the vape/e-cigarette unattended while charging
- once fully charged, remove the battery from the charger
- clean the battery charger contact once a week and
- never use a damaged vape/e-cigarette.



Plug-in air fresheners

If you're using plug-in air fresheners, make sure to:

- change any scent inserts when finished
- unplug them overnight and
- keep them away from flammable materials, e.g. clothes.

Candles

With candles you should:

- ensure that candles are on a stable base and placed on a saucer or plate
- never place candles directly on a surface, like a table and
- ideally, place candles in a glass jar or vase.



Do not place candles:

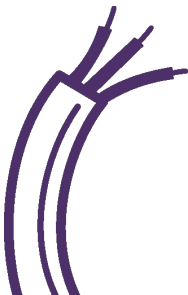
- next to furniture
- in the bedroom or
- near open windows where draughts can blow onto the flame.

Never place candles near Christmas trees (which are highly combustible) or where things can fall on them and start a fire. Make sure you extinguish candles properly after use and always extinguish them before going to bed.

Do not leave children or pets alone with candles.

Electrical circuit overload

Did you know that around half of the fires in England are caused by electricity? There are many ways that you can help keep your home safe.



- Always confirm that the correct fuse or circuit-breaker is fitted to avoid overheating.
- Ensure electrical appliances have a British or European safety mark when purchased.
- Try to use just one plug in each socket, as overloading multiway and extension cables can cause overheating and start a fire. Electrical extension reels should be fully unwound if used.
- Always check for dangerous and loose wiring, scorch marks and hot plugs and sockets, as well as fuses that blow and circuit-breakers that trip for no obvious reason.
- Do not try to carry out electrical works that you are not trained for – always contact a competent electrician if you are unsure.
- Have your electrical system inspected by a competent and qualified electrician every five years.

Devices and electrical appliances

Mobile phone and tablet chargers are a common cause of fires.

- Place them on a non-combustible surface when charging.
- Always turn off a charger when a device is not charging, as they can cause fires if left on with no device connected. Always turn them off when you go to bed.

For other appliances:



- Make sure portable heaters are positioned to prevent them falling over. If possible, turn them off overnight.
- Keep portable heaters clear of curtains and furniture and never use them for drying clothes.
- Clean the filters of tumble dryers regularly to avoid a build-up of lint, which is combustible and can cause fires.
- If an appliance smells hot or is smoking, turn it off immediately.
- Regularly check appliance cables and leads. Replace them if required.
- Electrical appliances should not be left unattended on beds and soft furnishings
- Electrical products can be recalled by manufacturers due to safety reasons; the average success rate for a product recall is only 10–20%.

Gas



Gas used for heating and cooking is highly combustible, and gas leaks can be very dangerous. It is recommended that gas appliances are checked annually by a Gas Safe-registered contractor. If you smell gas:

- contact your supplier immediately
- open windows to allow the gas to escape
- do not operate any electrical switches or use any open flames and
- leave the property and wait for the supplier to confirm that it is safe.

Electric blankets



You should always follow the manufacturer's instructions and test blankets every three years. The local fire and rescue service or Age UK may be able to test blankets for you at no cost.

- Store any electric blankets flat, rolled up or loosely folded, to avoid damaging the internal wiring.
- Unplug blankets before entering the bed unless there is a thermostatic control for safe all-night usage.
- Check blankets regularly for wear and tear and avoid buying them second-hand.
- Avoid getting the blanket wet. If it does get wet, ensure that it is completely dry before re-use.
- Never use an electric blanket and hot water bottle together.

Furniture



In the past, furniture has been filled or covered with combustible materials that contribute to fires and give off toxic smoke.

Even modern synthetic materials will give off toxic smoke that can kill quickly. UK regulations are now in place to reduce this risk, requiring manufacturers to meet minimum safety standards. Make sure you purchase furniture that has a permanent label confirming it complies with these regulations.

Escape routes

In case of a fire, you should have a planned and memorised escape route. This applies whether you are in your own home or visiting another property, such as a friend's house or a hotel. Doing this significantly increases the chances of you escaping a fire safely.

- Familiarise yourself with any specific fire escape routes designated for the building.
- Be aware of and plan any alternative escape routes.
- Plan an escape route and ensure all of the household are aware of it.
- Make sure the exit route is kept clear, including the exit itself..
- Locked external doors should have a thumb turn or the key left inside the lock or nearby so they can be opened easily in an emergency. Window keys should also be easily accessible.
- If there is a fire, do not use lifts unless a dedicated fire evacuation lift has been installed (such lifts are rare; if in doubt, check with the building manager or manufacturer).
- If living in a flat or maisonette, close the front door on evacuation if you can, to stop the fire spreading to communal areas.
- Rehearse the escape plan with your household, including any alternative routes.
- Do not forget to review your escape plan if any alterations are made to the building.
- Close internal doors at night if possible, as this will help to stop a fire spreading.

Important note on evacuation

Some tall multi-occupancy residential buildings may have a 'stay put' policy, meaning that, if there is a fire in a neighbouring unit, it may be safer to remain in your flat or maisonette, as the fire is expected to be contained by fire-resisting walls and floors. This policy should be checked with your building manager, or the fire brigade directly if there is no building manager.

A 'stay put' policy may be changed by the fire brigade during a fire in the rare event that the fire spreads beyond the dwelling of origin.

What should you do if a fire starts?



A fire can develop quickly and can create toxic fumes that may only require a few breaths to render you unconscious. The time to escape could only be a few minutes.

You need to act quickly and get out of your home as safely as possible. Follow these steps if there is a fire in your home or if your fire alarms go off.

- **Try not to panic and alert everyone in your home quickly.**
- **Close the door to the room where the fire is**, if possible, but do not endanger yourself.
- **Test closed doors by placing your hand against it.** Do not open the door if it feels warm, as there may be fire on the other side.
- **Get everyone out of your home as quickly as possible.** You should have planned and rehearsed an escape route. Do not stop to pick up possessions or look for pets.
- **Keep low as you escape:** the air will be clearer.
- **Do not attempt to tackle the fire yourself** unless the fire is small enough, you have a fire blanket/fire extinguisher immediately to hand (and know how to use them properly) and your escape route is clear. Call 999 first. Fires and thick black toxic smoke can escalate in less than two minutes, preventing escape. If in doubt: get out, stay out and call 999. Ask a neighbour to call 999 if you cannot do it yourself.
- **If you can't get out of the property without help, stay in a room with the door shut.** You should choose a room at the front of the property (or a suitable place for the fire brigade to assist) with a window and a phone (or mobile). Place bedding or soft materials at the bottom of the door to help block any smoke. Open the window and shout 'Help! Fire!'. Keep a whistle handy if it is hard for you to shout. If you have a phone, call 999.



Fire safety in the home

Smoke alarms

New houses are legally required to have smoke alarms fitted in important locations. This has significantly contributed to the reduction of deaths in domestic fires.



RICS strongly recommends that interlinked detectors are fitted in all homes.

How many alarms you need depends on the size and layout of your house.

- There should be at least one smoke alarm on each floor, in the communal hallway, in every bedroom, and in the living room.
- Do not fit smoke alarms in the kitchen or bathroom, as cooking or steam can set them off accidentally. A heat alarm should be fitted in the kitchen instead (see below).
- Most fires happen at night, so locate alarms where they will wake you up, such as close to bedrooms – within three metres of every bedroom door is best.
- Fit interlinked alarms, so a fire in one room will sound an alarm in all other rooms.
- Test alarms regularly – every week is good practice.
- Never disconnect or remove batteries if the alarm keeps beeping when not being tested. Either replace the battery or replace the smoke alarm.
- Replace alarms every ten years, or if they stop working properly.



Heat alarms

- Fit heat alarms in kitchens and other rooms where day-to-day activities such as cooking may trigger smoke alarms, rather than an actual fire.
- Test heat alarms and replace batteries in the same way as smoke alarms (see above).

Carbon monoxide alarms

Carbon monoxide alarms detect this harmful gas, which can cause poisoning and death. Fit these alarms in rooms where there are appliances that can emit carbon monoxide, such as gas boilers or fires, coal fires and solid-fuel burners. You should fit alarms close to the appliance, at least 300mm from any wall.

If an alarm has to be on a wall, it should be as high up as possible (above any doors and windows), not within 150mm of the ceiling and between 1–3m from the appliance. You should test and replace the batteries in the same way as smoke alarms.

Putting out fires

Leave fighting fires to the fire brigade: a fire can quickly get out of control and put you in danger if you attempt to tackle it.

However, if you have a fire extinguisher or fire blanket that you can use to put out a small fire that's located in one place, you must know how to use these safely.



Fire extinguishers

All new fire extinguishers should:

- meet current British Safety Standards (BS EN3) and
- be kept somewhere that's in easy reach in an emergency.

The best place to keep an extinguisher is the kitchen, as this is the starting point of most fires in the home. In most homes, a fire blanket and small wet chemical extinguisher in the kitchen is satisfactory.

Make sure:

- you have read the instructions.
- your extinguishers are serviced once a year and
- you replace any extinguisher that has been used.

Always call 999 **before** you attempt to stop a fire with an extinguisher.

- Do not put yourself in danger.
- Make sure you are positioned between a safe exit and the fire so you can escape if the fire escalates.
- Make sure the fire is contained before trying to put it out yourself.
- Make sure you use the right type of extinguisher for the fire.

Fire blankets

Fire blankets are made from fire-resistant fabric and are used to put out fires in kitchens. They can also be used to wrap a person whose clothes are on fire.

Fire blankets are best located in the kitchen, next to the cooker. If you have a fire blanket, make sure you understand how to use it and follow the manufacturer's instructions.



Accessibility and specific needs

Some people may need special assistance during a fire, such as young children, elderly people or those with a temporary condition that might hinder their escape (e.g. a broken leg).



Special arrangements can be made by creating a personal emergency evacuation plan (PEEP). Your local fire brigade can provide expert advice and help plan a bespoke PEEP.

If you have specific needs that require special arrangements, register with the local fire and rescue service to ensure they are aware of your circumstances. These tips can help you plan an effective escape in the event of a fire.

Mobility difficulties

- Use remote-controlled or easy-access alarms, which can be tested from the wall rather than the ceiling.
- If you find it difficult to test your own alarms, ask somebody to do it for you.
- If you have difficulty moving around, consider fitting an intercom, which will let you alert someone who can help in the event of an emergency.
- Make sure you have easy access to mobility aids at night, such as walking sticks, in case you need these for evacuation.

Hearing difficulties

- Use smoke alarms with strobe lights and vibration pads. Fit these in all bedrooms as well as the hallway or landing.
- In the event of a fire, evacuate the property and call 999, or ask a neighbour to do so if you have difficulty.
- If you have specialist equipment such as a textphone or minicom, use this to contact emergency services.

Visual impairments

- If you have trouble identifying alarms that need testing, put a coloured sticker on smoke alarms. The local fire and rescue service can also provide a coloured cover for some smoke and heat alarms.
- Consider fitting coloured tactile indicators such as 'bump-ons' – also known as 'plastic blisters' – on domestic appliances that could start a fire, to emphasise controls and switches to make sure you can switch them off properly.
- Fit tactile indicators along your planned escape route to find exits more easily. Rehearse your escape route if possible.

Oxygen

- Do not store oxygen in direct sunlight. Keep it in an area that is dry, well-ventilated and away from heat sources.
- Do not use oxygen near a naked flame, including gas and electric cookers: three metres is the minimum safe distance.
- Never smoke or use electrical equipment such as e-cigarettes or hairdryers while using oxygen.



Further guidance

We hope this guide is useful to you. If you'd like to know more about fire safety or how RICS can help, please contact us. For more advice on fire safety, our guide for landlords of rented and shared accommodation can be found [here](#).

Visit our website

Visit the [Fire safety hub](#) for more information on fire safety.

Consumer helplines

[Contact one of our regulated firms](#) for a 30-minute initial consultation.

Find a Surveyor

Please note that not all firms listed on the 'Find A Surveyor' website are RICS-regulated firms.

- [Find a surveyor in your local area](#)
- [Check whether your surveyor is regulated by RICS](#)
- [Read how RICS regulation helps consumers](#)



Discover more bite-sized guidance on fire safety

Here are some useful website addresses for related fire safety advice.

Fire safety in the home

- [Fire kills](#)
- [Fire safety for home owners](#)

Accessibility and special needs

- [Disabled Living Foundation](#)

Electrical appliances

- [Living Made Easy](#)
- [Product recalls](#)
- [Age UK](#)

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