

Fire safety

The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008

Many burn injuries, especially scald and flame burns, can result in permanent scarring, disfigurement and disability. The more serious injuries result in long and repeated periods of hospitalisation, many skin graft operations and on-going psychological trauma.

The majority of burn injuries to young children are caused by scalds from hot liquids. For information on scald prevention, see the Safety Centre's fact sheets on Kitchen Safety and Home Safety.

Young children can be fascinated by flames and fire, and do not realise the possible dangers. It is therefore important to protect them by making their home and environment as safe as possible.

Rates of flame burn injury

One in every six burn injuries to children aged 0–14 is a flame burn. There has been a 17% decrease in the number of children aged 0–4 admitted to hospital with flame burn injuries in recent years. This reduction is due to a number of factors, including fire-warning labels on children's nightwear, the banning of firecrackers, the use of safety guards on heaters, the use of central heating and education of parents, carers and children.

In a house fire, more people are injured by smoke rather than flames.

Causes of flame injury in children

House fires can be started simply by children playing with matches. Children should never have access to matches and lighters.

The majority of all house fires start in the kitchen, for example oil or fat fires. Other injuries are caused by clothing fires, electrical burns and contact burns from heaters or oven doors.

Older children are most likely to receive burns as a result of misusing flammable liquids and aerosol cans.

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Home fire safety

Fire safety equipment:

- The earlier a fire is detected, the greater the chance of escaping safely. Working smoke alarms are essential to protect life and property.

Install smoke alarms in your house or unit. If people, especially children, sleep with the bedroom door closed, install an extra alarm inside the bedroom.

Change the batteries in smoke alarms every year and regularly test them.

- Install a fixed guard around an open fire, and most heaters. A good test of whether the heater needs a guard is to carefully attempt to place your hand on the surface of the heater. If the surface is so hot that you cannot leave your hand there for ten seconds, the heater needs a guard to prevent contact burns to young children.
- Install a guard around the hot plates on the stove.
- Install a safety switch to prevent electrocution.
- Use power boards; they are safer than double adapters.
- Keep a fire blanket and a dry powder extinguisher in the kitchen and know how to use them. Fire blankets must be at least one metre from the stove and your fire extinguisher is best located near the kitchen entrance.

Fire safety behaviours:

- Use the back burners on the stove first and ensure pot handles point towards the back.
- Never use water to put out a fat or oil fire.
- Do not leave cooking, heaters, open fires and candles unattended.
- Regularly check the connection on the barbecue for any gas leaks.
- Fabrics and loose clothing can catch fire easily. Keep your clothing away from heat. Tie long hair back to prevent accidents.

Choose close-fitting nightwear for children with the label 'styled to reduce fire danger' or 'low fire danger'.

- Lock matches, cigarette lighters and flammable liquids away.

Lighters with child-resistant locks are available but they still need to be locked away.

- Clean the lint filter on clothes dryers every time you use them and let dryers go through a 'cool down' cycle.
- Fires caused by damaged and frayed cords can be prevented. Keep electrical appliances and cords in good repair by having them regularly checked. It is recommended that all repairs to electrical appliances be done by a qualified electrical tradesperson.
- Small fan heaters are not recommended with children in the home.

In the case of a house fire:

- Have a fire exit plan and practice it with the family. Make sure there are two ways out of the house. It is also important to have two means of exit from each room.
- All children should know how to "stop, drop, cover and roll" if their clothing catches on fire. Reinforce this with your child when you are practising a fire drill.
- In a house fire remember to crawl low in smoke to the nearest exit, to avoid smoke and poisonous gases.
- You may have to get out of your home quickly, so keep your keys in the locks if possible, or on a hook in the centre of the door.
- Do not lock deadlocks on doors at night. Install deadlocks that you can open from the inside without a key.
- In the event of fire, the emergency number to call is 000, from the nearest available phone. Be prepared to give name, address, and nearest crossroads.
- Make sure your house number is clearly visible from the street, should a fire truck ever be needed.

For further information:

- If your child is lighting or playing with fire contact the Juvenile Fire Awareness and Intervention Program (JFAIP). Telephone: 1300 309 988 Email: jfaip@mfb.vic.gov.au
- The Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) have many programs to help keep you, your family, your home, and your workplace safe from fire. These include programs for children, retired groups and multicultural groups. The CFA and MFB also provide training and advice for safety in the workplace.

Contact:

Community Education at MFB: (03) 9665 4464 or www.mfb.org.au

Community Education at CFA: (03) 9262 8444 or www.cfa.vic.gov.au

References:

- Statistics are based on those provided by the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit (Hazard 57, Autumn 2004, Monash University).
- MFB Home Fire Safety Brochure2-05/05

For further information
about the Safety Centre
Telephone 9345 5085
www.rch.org.au/safetycentre

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