



# HOME FIRES

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A fire can become life-threatening in just two to four minutes. A residence can be engulfed in flames in five to ten minutes.

Learn about fires:

- **Fire is FAST!** In less than 30 seconds a small flame can turn into a major fire. It only takes minutes for thick black smoke to fill a house or for it to be engulfed in flames.
- **Fire is HOT!** Heat is more threatening than flames. Room temperatures in a fire can be 100 degrees at floor level and rise to 600 degrees at eye level. Inhaling this super hot air will scorch your lungs and melt clothes to your skin.
- **Fire is DARK!** Fire starts bright, but quickly produces black smoke and complete darkness.
- **Fire is DEADLY!** Smoke and toxic gases kill more people than flames do. Fire produces poisonous gases that make you disoriented and drowsy.

## Before a fire

If you are insured, contact your insurance company for detailed instructions on protecting your property, conducting inventory and contacting fire damage restoration companies.

Create and practise a fire escape plan.

Remember that every second counts in the event of a fire. Escape plans help you get out of your home quickly. Practice your home fire escape plan twice each year. Some tips to consider when preparing this plan include:

- Find two ways to get out of each room in the event the primary way is blocked by fire or smoke.
- Make sure that windows are not stuck, screens can be taken out quickly and that security bars can be properly opened.
- Practise feeling your way out of the house in the dark or with your eyes closed.
- Teach children not to hide from firefighters.
- If you use a walker or wheelchair, check all exits to be sure you can get through the doorways.

## Fire safety tips

- Make digital copies of valuable documents and records like birth certificates.
- Sleep with your bedroom door closed.
- Keep a fire extinguisher in your kitchen.
- Consider installing an automatic fire sprinkler system in your residence.
- Store matches and lighters in a secure place, out of reach of children.
- Install smoke alarms.
- Keep flammable objects at least 1 meter away from any heating source.

## During a fire

- Drop down to the floor and crawl low, under any smoke to your exit. Heavy smoke and poisonous gases collect first along the ceiling.
- Before opening a door, feel the doorknob and door. If either is hot, or if there is smoke coming around the door, leave the door closed and use your second way out.
- If you open a door, open it slowly. Be ready to shut it quickly if heavy smoke or fire is present.
- If you can't get to someone needing assistance, leave the home and inform the fire department. Tell the emergency operator where the person is located.
- If pets are trapped inside your home, tell firefighters right away.
- If you can't get out, close the door and cover vents and cracks around doors with cloth or tape to keep smoke out. Call your fire department. Say where you are and signal for help at the window with a light-coloured cloth or a flashlight.
- Do not run back into the house while the house is burning.
- If your clothes catch fire, stop, drop and roll – stop immediately, drop to the ground and cover your face with your hands. Roll over and over or back and forth until the fire is out. If you or someone else cannot stop, drop and roll, smother the flames with a blanket or towel. Use cool water to treat the burn immediately for ten to twenty minutes. Cover with a clean, dry cloth. Get medical help right away.

## After a fire

- Check with the fire department to make sure your residence is safe to enter.
- Do not attempt to reconnect utilities yourself. The fire department should make sure that utilities are either safe to use or are disconnected before they leave the site.
- Get your fire report from your local fire department.
- Conduct an inventory of damaged property and items. Do not throw away any damaged goods until after you make the inventory of your items.
- Begin saving receipts for any money you spent related to fire loss. The receipts may be needed later by the insurance company and for verifying losses.
- Notify your insurance company of the fire.

## Prevent home fires

Home fires can be prevented. The following are simple steps that each of us can take to prevent a tragedy.

In South African houses smoke alarms are not as common as in some other countries, but it is the responsible thing to do to keep you and your family safe.

A working smoke alarm significantly increases your chances of surviving a deadly home fire:

- Replace batteries twice a year unless you are using 10-year lithium batteries.
- Install smoke alarms on every level of your home, including the basement.
- Replace the entire smoke alarm unit every 10 years or according to manufacturer's instructions.
- Never disable a smoke alarm while cooking – it can be a deadly mistake.
- Audible alarms are available for visually impaired people and smoke alarms with a vibrating pad or flashing light are available for the hearing impaired.

## Cooking

- Stay in the kitchen when you are frying, grilling or boiling food. Turn off the stove if you leave the kitchen for even a short period of time.
- Wear short, close-fitting or tightly rolled sleeves when cooking.
- Position braais at least three meters away from siding and deck railings, and out from under leaves and overhanging branches.
- Keep a fire extinguisher available.
- When cooking and oil starts burning, cover the pan with a lid or use your fire extinguisher. Do not extinguish the fire with water.

## Electrical and appliance safety

- Frayed wires can cause fires. Replace all worn, old or damaged appliance cords immediately and do not run cords under rugs or furniture.
- If an appliance has a three-prong plug, use it only in a three-slot outlet. Never force it to fit into a two-slot outlet or extension cord.
- Immediately shut off, then professionally replace light switches that are hot to the touch and lights that flicker.

## Holiday safety

- Set lights connected to a timer to turn off at night or when you leave the house.
- Replace any string of lights with worn or broken cords or loose bulb connections.
- Keep candles at least 12 inches away from flammable materials or consider using flameless candles.
- Water your Christmas tree daily and don't let it dry out. A dry tree is more flammable.
- Don't overload extension cords and outlets.

## Fireplaces and woodstoves

- Inspect woodstove pipes and chimneys annually and check frequently for damage or obstructions.
- Clean the fireplace: Before using your fireplace, make sure it is clean and free of any debris, soot, or creosote build-up. This will help prevent chimney fires.
- Use dry and seasoned wood: Burn only dry and seasoned hardwood in your fireplace. Wet or green wood can cause excessive smoke, which can lead to creosote build-up and increase the risk of a chimney fire.
- Use a fireplace screen: A fireplace screen can prevent embers and sparks from escaping the fireplace and igniting nearby combustibles.
- Keep flammable materials away: Keep any flammable materials like curtains, furniture, and paper away from the fireplace to prevent fires.
- Monitor the fire: Always keep an eye on the fire and never leave it unattended. When you're done using the fireplace, make sure the fire is completely out before leaving the room.
- Install smoke and carbon monoxide detectors: Make sure your home has working smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and test them regularly.



- Get your chimney inspected: Have your chimney inspected and cleaned by a professional chimney sweep at least once a year to prevent creosote build-up and ensure that the chimney is functioning properly.

## LPG heaters

LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) is a popular fuel source used in many homes for cooking and heating. However, it can be dangerous if not handled properly. Here are some tips for using LPG gas safely in your home.

- Make sure your LPG system is properly installed by a qualified technician. Regularly inspect and maintain your system to ensure it is in good working condition.
- Never tamper with your LPG system. This includes modifying or repairing it yourself.
- Store LPG cylinders in a cool, dry place, away from heat sources and direct sunlight. Keep them in an upright position, and make sure they are securely fastened.
- Use LPG appliances in a well-ventilated area. Open windows or doors to ensure proper air flow.
- Do not leave LPG appliances unattended while they are in use. Always turn off the gas supply when you are finished cooking or heating.
- Keep a fire extinguisher on hand in case of emergency.
- Do not smoke or use matches or lighters near LPG appliances or cylinders.
- In case of a gas leak, turn off the gas supply immediately and open all windows and doors to ventilate the area. Evacuate the premises and call emergency services. Do not use electrical switches or appliances or light a match or lighter in the vicinity of the leak.



## Keeping children safe

- Take the mystery out of playing with fire by teaching children that fire is a tool, not a toy.
- Store matches and lighters out of children's reach and sight, preferably in a locked cabinet.
- Never leave children unattended near operating stoves or burning candles, even for a short time.

## Paraffin

- Store paraffin products in a cool, dry place and away from direct sunlight. Keep them out of reach of children and pets.
- Do not store the paraffin in plastic cold drink bottles.
- Use caution when using petroleum paraffin products near open flames or other heat sources, as they are flammable.
- Do not ingest petroleum paraffin products, as they can be harmful if swallowed. If ingested, seek medical attention immediately.

## Candles

- Always keep candles away from flammable materials, such as curtains, paper and other decorations.
- Keep candles out of reach of children and pets.
- Place candles in sturdy holders that won't tip over easily.
- Do not leave candles unattended.
- Avoid placing candles in draughty areas or near air vents, as this can cause uneven burning and dripping.
- Keep candles at least 10 cm apart from each other.
- Do not touch or move a candle while it is burning as the wax and holder can be hot.
- Use a snuffer to extinguish candles instead of blowing them out.
- Never use a candle as a nightlight or leave it burning while you sleep.

## More fire prevention tips

- Never use a stove or oven to heat your home.
- Keep combustible and flammable liquids away from heat sources.
- Portable generators should NEVER be used indoors and should only be refuelled outdoors and in well-ventilated areas.



