



## House on Fire !

### House fires are rarely accidental

Again and again and again it happens! All too frequently on the six o'clock news a house fire is reported. Sometimes the residents are home; but when the building is unoccupied, the cause of a fire is often a mystery that will take investigators a while to determine. Reasons are many and varied; but in the main, most could have been avoided.

A candle left burning unattended is often the cause. Certainly there is a kind of magic about them with their soft, flickering glow; and the scented ones are quite pleasant if you like that sort of thing; but the noxious, suffocating smoke that can result when they burn down and set light to something close is very much the reverse. I think it unlikely that anyone wouldn't extinguish a candle before leaving the house, but I suppose anything is possible.

Little consideration seems to be employed with regard to how fires can start; except in hindsight when the devastating aftermath has to be faced. Who would have thought that charging up a mobile phone or tablet could set the entire house ablaze? It's been done a hundred times without incident; then, on just one occasion it overheats and bursts into flame. Bad enough if it was on a hard surface, but what about if it was sitting on the bed? It does happen; and when no-one was there to see it... well, you can only imagine. The fact is, any device using re-chargeable batteries should be checked occasionally; and as soon as fully charged it needs unplugging from the mains.

With the push for reducing greenhouse gases many new products are battery-operated and require regular re-charging. E-scooters, for example, are growing in popularity and as well as other similar devices, most in fact, they use lithium batteries. For some reason this type can explode, even if not being charged, and when they do there's a spray of burning material thrown out like napalm which will set light to anything flammable that it touches. Such was one case in Australia where three of these items were left in a room. Unexplainably they exploded and burned the house down – and they weren't even plugged in and charging! Following this particular news report was an addition stating that, in 2022 up to December E-scooters exploding had caused 78 house fires.

It does bear thinking about. Advice is to re-charge these devices in a safe place away from combustibles; but it would seem that, even when done in a garage it can still be a danger; and not for the first time has one been left overnight, which proves too long in some cases. Neighbours or passers-by may notice smoke or flames and alert the occupants of the property. Sometimes they can't even do that if the fire has spread from the garage to adjoining house. Then it becomes a life-or-death situation. So much for complacency. No-one can afford to ignore the possibilities; and instructions that come with re-chargeable products should be followed to the letter.

There are so many household items that can spark a fire including electric blankets and devices that can be programmed to switch on automatically when no-one is home; slow cookers for instance. I recall a case when a TV had been left on while a mother went to collect the kids from school. She returned to witness the fire brigade spraying her home with hoses. I believe she lost the house and everything in it. Then, of course, there are room heaters, especially the portable variety. Apart from keeping the occupants comfortable they are handy for finishing off the laundry which isn't quite dry.

Placed too close to the heat source, however, is a tragedy in the making.

Electricity in general is convenient and ought to be safe. As long as any faults are attended to by a licenced electrician there shouldn't be a problem. So, if a light flickers for no reason, the globe keeps blowing, or a power socket doesn't always switch on and off properly, something is clearly wrong and needs fixing. Any electrically-powered unit that begins to misbehave requires attention; but by professionals who know what they are doing. Certainly this costs money; not as much, though, as it will if the fault or botched DIY job causes a fire. Unfortunately, electrical faults aren't always obvious; and when a fire starts as a result somewhere out of sight and there was no prior warning, it can hardly be blamed on the resident. This would have to be regarded as one of the few truly accidental home fires. Not many are.

Parents and carers are usually careful to ensure young children don't play with anything that might start a fire, keeping matches and lighters out of their reach. Unfortunately no amount of warnings will deter adventurous kids and they will find a way if nobody's watching. What begins as a bit of fun in the bedroom setting light to a small piece of paper as a kind of experiment may not seem dangerous to them; not until the flame contacts something flammable and spreads rapidly. They don't mean to do it, of course, and will hopefully fetch an adult to stop the blaze before it really takes hold; but if they are home alone the consequences are likely to be disastrous.

Everyone should be aware of the consequences of house fires. Unless the source of the blaze is extinguished quickly it can spread and is almost impossible to stop; often fuelled by soft furnishings and other items that are sometimes explosive when they catch light. Synthetic fillings in bedcovers, lounge suits and the like not only burn fiercely, but as they do they produce suffocating smoke and toxic fumes that can render a person unconscious in a matter of seconds. It bears to be wise before the fact and take all necessary precautions.

Smoke alarms are a must, should be fitted as recommended and tested regularly; batteries replaced every year as a matter of course. Unplug re-chargeable battery units from the mains power as soon as they are fully charged. Don't place flammable items close to any heat source. And be extra careful when cooking, keeping an occasional eye on the pots, pans and white goods to make sure they don't overheat. Ensure that bottle of oil is placed well clear of the cooking area. And try not to be in so much of a rush that safety and commonsense take a back seat. Your home is precious; even more so the lives of the people and pets in it. Discuss the possibility of a fire breaking out and have an emergency evacuation plan that everyone understands.

Finally, whether insured or not, if the house is gutted and everything in it is lost, recovery will be hard. As an extra precaution, make yourself up a grab-and-go bag that is easily accessible, light enough to carry and contains the essentials for returning to normal as quickly as possible. Download "Your Emergency Check List" from the foot of ASOH Home Page; and for more detailed information have a read of the Focus 16 article, "In Case of Emergency." Both could be life-savers.

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