

FIRE SAFETY

Every three hours a home burns in New Zealand. The estimated annual cost of residential fire damage is around \$142,000,000. The emotional cost is much, much greater. Fire kills on average 12 people each year and injures hundreds more. Children, the elderly and the disabled are especially vulnerable. Being fire safe starts with having smoke alarms installed and maintained, but it also means taking care when cooking and using heaters, when using matches and smoking, candles and electrical appliances.

It's easy to be fire safe, and it could save your family.

Smoke Alarms – Most house fire deaths happen when people are asleep and unlikely to smell the smoke. Because fire is fast you need an effective alarm that will detect the smoke and wake you up. The best all-round alarms for all fire scenarios are photoelectric smoke alarms. But no alarm is any good if the battery is dead, so change it every year – perhaps on a family member's birthday or at the start or end of daylight saving. Also, keep it clean because spider webs or dust can stop it working. Install alarms in bedrooms, hallways, sleep outs, and living rooms and test them regularly. It is recommended that you replace them every ten years.

Cooking – This is the number one fire danger in your home so never leave the kitchen if you're cooking, especially if you're frying. If the oil or fat starts smoking, turn the heat off and snuff out a fire with a pot lid or oven tray – never try to carry the pot outside. Also, never cook when you've been drinking.

Matches and Lighters – Use child-resistant lighters and safety matchbox holders and store these up high. Teach your children to go to an adult immediately if they find matches etc.

Smoking – Do not smoke in bed. It is dangerous, especially if you fall asleep while smoking. Use a solid ashtray to stub out butts and soak them with water before throwing out. If you or others have been smoking in the lounge, check behind cushions for butts and ashes before going to bed. Better yet, smoke outside.

Candles – Only ever burn candles in a secure candle holder that can't tip easily and keep them away from anything that could burn, especially curtains. Always put candles out before you go to sleep or leave a room, and never let children play with candles or be unsupervised in a room with a lit candle.

Power Points and Appliances – Don't overload power points or multi-boxes and always use a multi-box with a circuit breaker. Make sure non-essential appliances are switched off at the wall when you've finished using them.

Heating – Learn and remember the heater-metre rule – keep furniture, clothes and curtains at least one metre away from heaters and fireplaces. Also teach children not to go near them, especially if they are wearing loose or flammable clothing. Treat ashes as if they're still hot, because they might be – ashes can take up to five days to cool so make sure you leave them in a metal container, well clear of your house.

Electric Blankets – Although it's cosy to lie in bed with your electric blanket on, don't. Always turn it off at the wall before getting in. Make sure it's secured to your bed and have it checked each year.

To be really sure you can sleep easy, do a fire check every night.

- Are all kitchen appliances turned off?
- Are all heaters off one metre away from anything they could burn?
- Are there any stray cigarette butts and have any ashtrays been emptied into a metal bin outside?
- Is the television switched off at the power switch on the set – and not on the remote control's 'standby'?
- Are any candles still burning?
- Is the kitchen and living room doors closed to slow a fire from spreading to bedrooms?
- Is the house secure with keys in deadlocks?
- Are the passageways clear for a quick escape?
- Have you turned off all electric blankets before getting into bed?

For more easy fire safety advice, go to the New Zealand Fire Service's website www.fire.org.nz