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rics.org/firesafety

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Introduction



Although the number of fire-related fatalities in the UK has been gradually decreasing over the past 40 years there are still a significant number of injuries and deaths each year from fires, with most occurring in single, two and three storey buildings.

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

The Home Office's fire statistics data tables show that in 1981/82 there were a total of 937 fire-related fatalities in the UK, while in 2017/18 this number was 395. Despite the gradual decline over this time, this still represents 395 deaths too many. In England alone, the number of fatalities in 2017/18 caused by accidental dwelling fires was 243. This guide aims to reduce this number by promoting good practice in fire safety in the home.

How to use this guide

This guide offers basic advice about fire safety in the home, and has been written specifically with homeowners and residential tenants in mind.

Having a basic understanding of fire safety is very important for all of us, and in extreme circumstances can mean the difference between life and death in a fire situation. RICS have therefore commissioned this guide in order to spread awareness among homeowners and tenants and communicate basic advice in a single volume that is written in a non-technical and easy to follow format. It has been written by RICS Chartered Building Surveyors and a multi-discipline fire safety advisory group.

Making a difference

Fire safety design and regulation is a complex area, and there are numerous physical safety features in buildings that contribute to fire safety in ways that may not be immediately apparent, e.g. compartmentation, protected zones, fire doors, smoke seals and so on. The purpose of this guide is not to cover these technical items that are mandated by regulation and often out of sight, but to draw attention to the things that you can make a difference to, which are equally important in reducing fire risk.

Therefore, this guide can assist you in making your home as safe as possible by understanding the risks and looking at ways to minimise and manage fire safety measures.

This responsibility mainly lies with the occupier, however in some cases the Landlord has responsibilities to ensure that certain elements have been provided, tested and are in good working order e.g. electrical and heating systems. The content of the guide is split between owner-occupier and rented/shared accommodation to make this clear.

As this document aims to provide general information on useful domestic fire safety measures, you should be aware it does **not** provide detailed technical guidance on all fire safety procedures, and you should seek further information where necessary. For any help or advice contact your local fire authority.

Common causes of fires

Cigarettes

Smoking is still a significant cause of house fires, and on average somebody in the UK dies every six days as a result. If you or someone in your household smokes, you should be aware of the following safety points.

- Ensure cigarettes are stubbed out properly – carelessly discarded smoking materials are still one of the biggest causes of domestic fires.
- Do not leave a lit cigarette or pipe lying around, as they can easily start a fire or smoulder for some time before creating a fire later.
- Never smoke in bed.
- Use a proper ashtray that is in a stable, secure position and made of non-combustible material.
- Take care when smoking while tired as you might easily fall asleep and start a fire.

E-cigarettes/vaping

E-cigarettes are relatively new, but recent figures published by the BBC show that these are likely to have caused over 100 fires in just two years. If you use an e-cigarette, follow these safety tips:

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

Candles

Candles can look attractive in the home, creating pleasant lighting or nice aromas. However, they are also the cause of two house fires a day in the UK, and these are precautions that should be followed.

- Ensure that candles are on a stable base, and placed on a saucer or plate – never directly on a surface like a table. They should not be placed next to furniture, in the bedroom, or near open windows where draughts can blow curtains on to the flame.
- Make sure you extinguish candles properly after use.
- Children should not be left alone with candles.
- Keep pets away from lit candles.
- Consider replacing candles with small, battery-powered replicas.



Electrical circuit overload

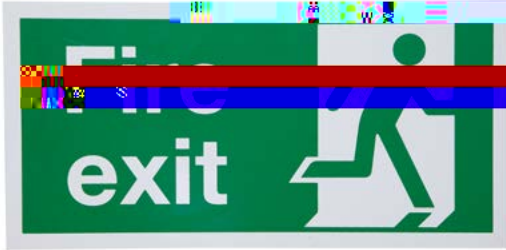
Around half the fires in England are caused by electricity, so you should check the following on your electrical installations.

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Forward planning and fire escape basics



- Locked external doors should have the key left inside the lock or nearby so they can be opened easily in an emergency. Window keys should also be easily accessible, and all the household and any visitors should know their whereabouts.
- The normal entry into the property is usually the best exit in the event of fire as it is most familiar.
- A second exit route should be planned in case the first one is blocked.
- If there is a fire, do not use lifts unless a fireproof lift has been installed. Note that such lifts are rare, and if in doubt you should 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.

Escape routes

One of the most fundamental fire precautions you can take is to plan and memorise your escape route, whether you are in your own home, or visiting another property such as a friend's house or a hotel. Doing so will significantly increase the chances of you and your family escaping a fire safely. There must also be a suitable balance between security and fire safety – all occupants must be able to open doors or windows as appropriate from inside and escape if there is a fire. Some key pointers for escaping fire:

- Familiarise yourself with any specific fire safety strategies or escape routes designated for the building.
- Be aware of 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. Any blockages on communal escape routes should be cleared and / or immediately notified to the building manager for action.

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 when the building fire alarm goes on. 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 if they think this becomes appropriate.

What to do in the event of a fire in your home

A fire can develop quickly and create highly toxic fumes that may only require three or four breaths to render you unconscious. It's therefore vital you act quickly and get out of the home as quickly and as safely as possible. Know and follow these steps if there is a fire in your home or if your fire alarms go on.

- Try not to panic. Alert everyone in the house quickly by shouting 'FIRE'.
- Do not endanger yourself, but if possible close the door to the room where the fire is.
- 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 the house as quickly as possible. You should have planned and rehearsed an escape route, as above. Do not stop to pick up possessions or look for pets.
- As you escape, keep low where the air will be clearer and to avoid smoke as best possible.

- Do not attempt to tackle fires yourself unless you have a fire blanket or fire extinguisher immediately to hand, know how to use them properly, and the fire is small enough and your escape route is clear. Call 999 first. Fires can escalate in less than two minutes. If in doubt, get out, stay out and call 999.
- If you cannot call 999 yourself, ask a neighbour if they can.
- If you cannot get out of the property without help, stay in a room with the door shut. Ideally this room should have access to a window and a phone (or mobile), and be at the front of the property or in a suitable place for the fire brigade to assist. 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.



Putting out fires

Fighting fires is best left to the fire brigade as a fire can quickly get out of control and place you in danger if you attempt to tackle it.



There are various types of extinguisher available:

Water: Can be used on materials including wood, paper or cloth. Do not use water on an electrical fire, on liquids or grease, or on oil or fat pan fires.

Dry powder: These are safe for use on most types of fire except on oil or fat pan fires.

Foam: These are safe for general use, except on oil, fat pan fires or electrical fires.

Carbon Dioxide (CO₂): For electrical fires and fires with flammable liquids, except oil or fat pan fires.

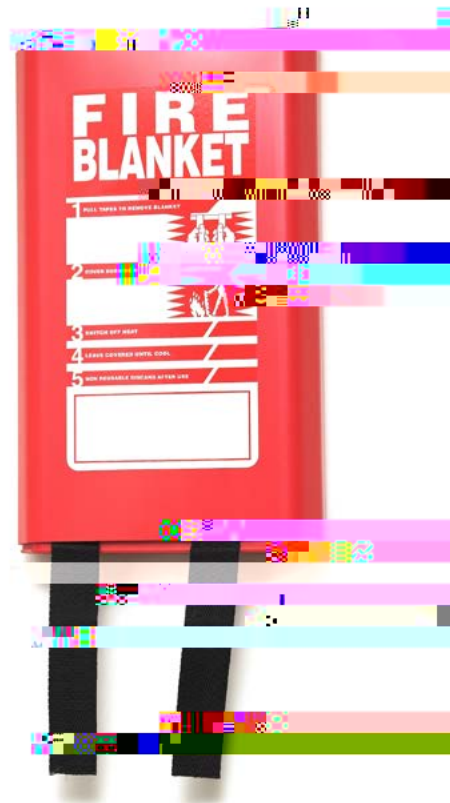
Before you make any attempt to stop a fire with an extinguisher, always call 999 first. If using a fire extinguisher:

- do not put yourself in danger, and 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 used to put out fires in kitchens, for example chip-pan fires. 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 are fitting a fire blanket, you should understand how to use it and follow the manufacturers instructions.



Rented or shared accommodation

It is important to note that to help keep a home safe from fire, a landlord must meet certain obligations under law, and the local authority can issue a remedial action notice and impose a fine of up to £5,000 if they fail to meet these obligations.

Electrical compliance

Smoke alarm compliance

- The landlord must ensure that a smoke alarm is fitted on each level of the property.
- The landlord must test smoke alarms on the first day of new tenancies, and subsequent testing is the responsibility of the tenants.
- RICS recommends that tenants test alarms on a weekly basis.

Carbon monoxide alarms

- The landlord must provide a carbon monoxide alarm in rooms where any solid fuel appliance is installed, for example in a coal fire or log-burning stove, or where gas appliances are provided.
- The landlord must test carbon monoxide alarms on the first day of new tenancies in the same way as smoke alarms, and tenants are responsible for subsequent testing.
- RICS also recommends that alarms are tested by tenants once a week.

Gas appliance checks

- The landlord must arrange for gas appliances to be serviced and checked annually by Gas Safe-registered professionals – [hse.gov.uk/gas/domestic/faqlandlord.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/gas/domestic/faqlandlord.htm)

RICS has a range of free guides available for the property issues listed here.

Development issues

Useful links

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

General fire safety information

Fire safety in the home
firekills.campaign.gov.uk

Accessibility and special needs

The Disabled Living Foundation
www.dlf.org.uk

Electrical appliances

Product recalls
www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/product-recalls

Age UK
www.ageuk.org.uk

Rented or Shared Accommodation

Renting out your property (England and Wales)
www.gov.uk/renting-out-a-property

Housing health and safety rating system (HHSRS): guidance for landlords and property-related professionals
www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-health-and-safety-rating-system-guidance-for-landlords-and-property-related-professionals

Further information

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.

Visit our website

[rics.org/consumerguides](https://www.rics.org/consumerguides)

alternatively email

contactrics@rics.org or call the RICS Contact Centre **02476 868 555**

Consumer advice

The Chartered Surveyors' Voluntary Service

[rics.org/uk/about-rics/responsible-business/welfare-and-corporate-responsibilities/chartered-surveyors-voluntary-service](https://www.rics.org/uk/about-rics/responsible-business/welfare-and-corporate-responsibilities/chartered-surveyors-voluntary-service)

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