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Winter safety warning – new data reveals 15% increase in winter house fires

With winter upon us, Australians are being urged to take care when using heating appliances, open-fires and candles, as the risk of fire-related incidents in the home jumps 15% in winter compared to autumn.

NRMA Insurance has released new data which reveals 1,143 home and contents fire claims were received in 2022. In the first four months of 2023, it had already received 294 fire-related claims ahead of winter, when the risk and number of fire accidents increases.

The leading cause of fires in the home are related to cooking, with 25% of all fire claims caused by kitchen appliances, due to either faulty products or unattended stovetops and ovens.

This is followed by other household appliances such as air conditioners (7%), fuse boxes (6%) and heating appliances and fireplaces (3.5%).

NRMA Insurance Claims Executive Manager Natalie Major said the arrival of winter is a critical safety reminder for households due to the increased risk of fires caused by electrical and gas heaters and open fireplaces.

“A fire in the home can easily be sparked in the kitchen, or by a heater, fireplace or candle, and once the flames take hold, it can spread quickly, putting lives and safety at risk,” Ms Major said.

“Australians are using heating appliances and open fires more frequently in winter, so we want everyone to be aware of some of the potential risks and the safety precautions you can take to avoid them.

“Never place heaters close to curtains or other flammable items. While it can be tempting to use your heaters for drying clothes, they are not intended for this use and can easily catch fire, so never place clothes close to or on top of a heater.”

In 2022 NRMA Insurance received 40 heater and fireplace-related claims, with 60% of these fires occurring during winter.

“With the weather getting cooler it’s important your heaters are in a good condition with no faults or safety issues. Remember to have your appliances, fireplaces and heating systems regularly serviced by a qualified technician as dust and other debris can build over time and spark a fire. And make sure you have tested your smoke alarms,” Ms Major said.

Concerningly, NRMA Insurance data also shows an increase in fires caused by candles with 38 fires in 2022 and another nine incidents already this year. There has been a 15% increase in candle fires since 2020.

Ms Major continued: “Candles are a lovely addition to the home but need to be enjoyed safely. Always follow the product’s instructions, never leave candles unattended, or close to open windows, curtains, or walls.”

NRMA Insurance recommends following these tips to help prevent a dangerous fire:

- Be mindful of your surroundings and don't leave heaters and open-flames near fire-prone areas such as carpets, curtains, and walls.
- Remember to turn off electrical appliances when not in use and especially when you are leaving your home. Set an alarm or reminder on your phone to help you remember.
- Don't leave your cooking appliances unattended when in use. It's surprising how easily a stove top can catch alight and if the flames reach the exhaust system it can spread throughout the house incredibly quickly.
- Clean the lint from you clothes dryer after each use.
- Don't use an electrical appliance that is showing signs of being faulty and take caution when using cheaper electrical products.
- Follow all operation guidelines for any heating or cooking appliances.
- Use qualified technicians for electrical upgrades in your home. Only engage a qualified, licensed electrician which will reduce the likelihood of faulty workmanship.

Top 10 causes of fire-related home and contents claims in 2022*

1. Kitchen appliances
2. Household appliances
3. Fuse box
4. Heaters and fireplaces
5. Neighbouring property
6. Solar panels and related equipment
7. Candles
8. Outdoor machinery (for example lawn mowers)
9. Arson
10. Laundry appliances

**Top causes of fire-related home and contents claims received by NRMA Insurance between January to December 2022.*

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About NRMA Insurance

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NRMA Insurance is backed by IAG, the largest general insurer in Australia and New Zealand.