

Fire and Burns

Including contact burns and dry burns

Fire & Burns: the statistics

Fire and burns are a significant risk for Western Australian children. Each year Princess Margaret Hospital ED treats approximately:

- 150 Contact burn injury presentations
- 25 Contact with Fire or Flame presentations
- 60 Other burn presentations (Not Scalds)

The majority of child fire and burn deaths and admissions to hospital are for children under five.

Kim & Leo's story

By the time four-year-old Kim and his younger brother Leo were found by fire-fighters in the lounge of their Auntie's home it was too late.

The boys had been staying over, and had woken up early and headed for the lounge. According to the fire report, they appear to have found and started a fire with a cigarette lighter, found near their bodies. It is believed the curtains by the sliding doors caught fire first.

By the time Kim and Leo's Auntie woke up, the kitchen, dining room and lounge were full of smoke and flames. She couldn't get into the lounge to get them out.

Kim and Leo's bodies were found huddled in a corner between the sofa and the wall. They had died of smoke inhalation.

There had been visitors in the home the evening before. One of them smoked, and it is thought he might have left his lighter by mistake.

A smoke detector installed in the home would almost certainly have saved the boys.



How fire & burn injuries happen

Burns are the result of contact with flames and hot objects. Other fire related injuries include damage to lungs from smoke inhalation, and asphyxiation.

Burn hospitalisations are due to children coming into contact with a wide variety of flame and heat sources. Home heaters and fires, BBQ's and irons feature highly.

House fires the major cause of death

Each year there are approximately 2,000 residential fires in Western Australia.

- The great majority of child fire and burn deaths are associated with fires in private dwellings such as houses, flats or caravans.
- Two out of three children killed are under five. Night fires are the most life threatening.
- Older, poorer quality housing is at greatest risk of fire. These homes are also less likely to have smoke alarms.
- The most common reasons for house fires are candles left unattended, cooking, smoking and electrical faults in products or in house wiring. Sometimes young children are involved in starting fires with lighters and matches.
- Many fires are limited to one room, however these can still be dangerous, producing clouds of dangerous, sometimes toxic smoke and reducing oxygen in the house.
- For this reason, smoke inhalation and asphyxiation is the leading factor in house fire deaths.

Why children are at risk in house fires

Young children have small lung capacity, are easily disoriented and confused, and may hide (e.g. under a bed or in a closet) rather than try to escape a fire. Older children may try to put a fire out when it is unsafe to do so.

Safety success with nightclothes

In 1979 a staggering 300 Australian children were admitted to hospital after being burned when their nightclothes caught on fire.

Flimsy, loose-fitting girls' nighties were often involved. These would swirl into contact with flames or hot surfaces and burn very quickly.

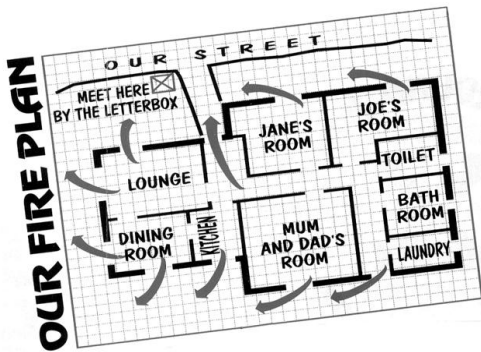
Since then, a number of prevention efforts have led to a major improvement in injury rates:

- An Australian Standard for warning labels was developed and a consumer product safety law made it illegal to sell nightclothes without these.
- The labels, in association with publicity campaigns, have led to increased awareness of the dangers and a change to safer materials and designs.
- There have been changes also in the design of heaters. Older style kerosene heaters with poor guardrails and a naked flame are much less common.
- As a result of these efforts, the number of children hospitalised for burns from clothing catching alight has dropped to around 30 per year.

Priorities for prevention

To Survive Fires

- **Install smoke alarms:** Test their batteries regularly, and replace these annually. Fires grow quickly. Smoke alarms are designed to give you warning of fires early enough to get out safely. While all new houses are now required to have smoke alarms fitted, many existing homes still do not have them. Contact Kidsafe or your local fire brigade about the best type and placement for your home.



- **Have a fire escape plan** that you practice with your children at least twice a year. This is important for all families, but particularly those living in rural and high bush fire risk areas. Teach children what to expect in a fire.
- Have **fire extinguishers** or **fire blankets** on hand (e.g. in the kitchen but not right next to the stove). These will help deal with small fires, but with larger fires the priority is to save lives. Once everyone is safely away from the fire, it may be wiser to leave than to fight it.
- Practice "GET DOWN LOW and GO GO GO" and "STOP, DROP and ROLL" with children.

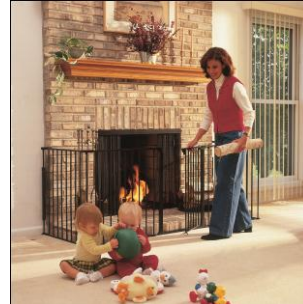
For further information on Preparing your home to prevent fire contact FESA: Fire and Emergency Services Authority www.fesa.wa.gov.au

To Prevent Fires

- Keep matches and lighters out of reach of children. Children start many fires. For this reason, Australian laws now require cigarette lighters to have child resistant mechanisms. These are designed to make lighting them difficult for young children, but remember – they are not "child proof".
- Ensure heaters are away from curtains, furniture, clothing, bedding and other flammable material. Check they are turned off when you go to bed.
- Install electrical safety switches to protect against faulty wiring or products. Check electrical appliances for frayed cords or smoking, and that electrical power boards and switches are not overloaded.

To Prevent Contact Burns

- Install guards around fires and heaters and on top of stoves



- Keep children out of dangerous areas (e.g. the kitchen while preparing meals).
- Choose low fire-risk children's nightwear styled to be close fitting and made of less flammable material. Look for the fire risk label.
- Closely supervise children at BBQ's. Petrol and other volatile liquids should not be used to light fires.
- Think twice about using a baby walker. They enable children to move quickly into danger, and to reach hazards such as irons, heaters and fires.
- Keep irons and iron cords out of reach.



eg. Iron Safe

First Aid for Burns

Anyone who has the care of young children should take a first aid course in paediatric first aid and resuscitation. Courses are conducted by:

- St John Ambulance Association
- Australian Red Cross
- Royal Life Saving Society

Local branches of these operations are listed in the white pages of your telephone directory.

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For more information ☎ (08) 9340 8509

Child Safety Information Line ☎ 1800 802 244

Poisons Information Centre ☎ 13 11 26