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Article

Don’t let fire destroy the finer things in your life

Dishni Mahendran • June 12, 2023

Electrical devices and electrical distribution faults are responsible for 12.8% and 11.9% of the causes of house fires in the UK respectively, a dramatic increase in the last 20 years. This could be attributed to the increase in the number of devices each household now has: two decades ago, the average home had a single desktop computer, shared by the household and perhaps two mobile phones. Now, every older member of the household is likely to have a phone in addition to either a laptop or a tablet. When you add virtual assistant technology and home management hubs, gaming devices and the multiple charging stations, you can see how much our usage has increased.

With this socio-economic change towards the digital era, the risk of a fire in our homes is increasing. While fire safety measures in homes are generally improving - (almost every home now has smoke detectors, and most have better ventilation too) - the direction of travel for risk is moving in the other direction: upwards.One of our insureds left a candle burning on her mantlepiece, went out and the flame caught hold of the Christmas decorations hung up on the mantlepiece. While the fire was contained to the hearth, the 2 oil paintings hung up on the wall above were damaged. The whole ground floor needed to be redecorated due to the smoke damage. Unfortunately, the paintings suffered smoke damage from the fire, which led to a negative impact on the value of both the paintings and accrued restoration fees.

To draft this article, I have just taken a swift review of the devices in my own home. Between the four of us who live here, I have counted 26 wired or charged electrical devices, excluding non-smart hard-wired items like kettles and fridges. It was a shock to me to tot up how many there were, across every single room of the house.

All this has a big impact on your fire risk at home, and one which outweighs the safety benefits offered by smoke alarms; the net result is that risk is increasing. There is a well-documented strand of flammability within mobile phones, for instance, with several models

showing a tendency to overheat and burst into flames; and of course, it is also safe to say that some of the most frequently used and transported cables are charging cables, making them subject to fraying and overheating. Finally, many people are tempted to buy cheap electrical items with degraded copper cores and less insulation, making them much more flammable.

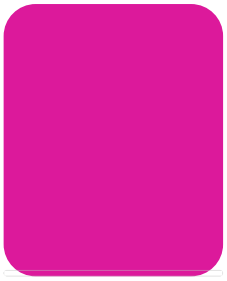
The other impact on home fire risk is the increased amount of time that we're all spending there. Although Covid (for now) is less of a threat, the resulting increase in homeworking is not. Millions more people now plug in for the day at home, utilising laptops, phones, speakers, additional screens, headsets and wi-fi extenders for hours at a time in a non-air-conditioned home environment. This is particularly relevant for those who live in older homes, where the wiring in the house could be older and not necessarily up to the standards for such intensive regular use.

Bear in mind that half the homes built before 1973 don't have an updated electrical system, so if you live in a home that's more than 40 years old, you may want to consider asking a licensed electrician to inspect your home and suggest improvements that will prevent an electrical fire from happening.

While all of these issues impact almost all homeowners, they are particularly relevant to people with high-value insurance policies. If you own fine art, it is simply irreplaceable; and while other items, such as watches, jewellery and high-cost bags and trainers, can still be bought; the impact of a fire and the loss of treasured belongings is something that no one should have to go through if it can be avoided. Where smoke damage is concerned; even if the restoration job is state of the art, the painting's value is most likely to depreciate.

Beazley's Fine art and Private Clients underwriters offer sound advice to anyone out there with significant collections of jewellery, fine art or other unique items.

It's all about prevention. So, make sure that you have had your collections properly valued. Ensure that you have fire safety equipment installed, including smoke detectors, especially if you live in an older property. You should also consider having an electrical safety inspection to improve safety as well as properly caring for electrical devices; by not overloading extension leads and unplugging them when not in use. Talk to your underwriter and be certain to regularly update the valuations of your belongings on your insurance policy. And above all, enjoy the electrical items that are such an important feature of a modern home; but make sure that the cables and wiring that charge them are safe; and the devices themselves not left to overheat or be put at risk of fire. With this in mind, the increasing multiplication of electrical items can be safely enjoyed, without risking your most precious belongings in a household fire.



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1 Fire statistics: what are the key figures in the UK? (netatmo.com

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