

# media release

Metropolitan Fire Service  
Consumer and Business Services



## Avert therapeutic wheat bag fire risk

Thursday, 9 May 2013

The Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS) and Consumer and Business Services (CBS) have joined forces to remind about the dangers of overheating or misusing therapeutic wheat bags.

Interstate, a Coroner has found an elderly NSW woman died after a wheat bag was used to warm a bed. A fire started, and tragically the woman was unable to escape her burning home.

MFS Commander of Community Safety and Resilience, Greg Howard said if wheat bags are overheated or misused, there is potential for heat-related burn injuries or a house fire that claims life or property.

"A vital message the MFS would like to convey is that therapeutic wheat bags **should not be used in bed or as bed warmers** as there is a danger of people falling asleep. By the time heat-related burn injuries set in - or an overheated or overcooked wheat bag causes a fire, it might be too late for a sleeping person to be able to respond."

"The hidden danger is that an overheated wheat bag can smoulder, creating large amounts of smoke. And for sleeping residents, smoke is the killer," Commander Howard said.

The MFS and Consumer and Business Services warn there should be extreme caution if therapeutic wheat bags are used with the elderly or infirm. Do NOT use wheat bags with babies or young children.

Deputy Commissioner for Consumer Affairs Dini Soulio said: "The use of a hot wheat bag carries a small but significant risk of serious burn injury."

"I would also remind people that microwave oven power outputs vary greatly, and consumers should take this into account when following the heating instructions. Some wheat bags may have inadequate or incorrect use instructions and consumers should exercise caution," Mr Soulio said.

MFS Commander, Greg Howard said, "Wheat bags should only be used as a heat pack for direct application to the body - but never in bed or as a bed warmer. Watch for signs of overheating or overcooking. Over time, wheat will dry out and start to emit a cooked/burnt smell. This is letting you know that it is time to replace your wheat bag."

"If you notice a smell of over-cooking, burning or signs of smoking or charring, safely remove the wheat bag to an outside area to cool before discarding it in an outside rubbish bin," Commander Howard said.

The MFS and Consumer and Business Services recommend that the following fire safety guidelines be applied when using therapeutic wheat bags or pillows:

- Do not overheat wheat bags. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- Use wheat bags only as a heat pack for direct application to the body. **Do not use them as bed warmers.**
- Do not use wheat bags as heat packs in bed to avoid the danger of falling asleep whilst they are in use.
- Use wheat bags with extreme caution with the elderly or infirm.
- Do NOT use wheat bags with babies or young children.
- Do not reheat until the wheat bag has completely cooled. Reheating before the bag has cooled may be just as dangerous as overheating.
- Watch for signs of over-use: an over-cooked odour; a smell of burning; or, in extreme cases, smoking or charring. If you observe any of these signs, immediately cool the wheat bag safely in an outside, open area before discarding it.
- Do not put wheat bags into storage until they are cold. Leave them to cool on a non-combustible surface such as a kitchen sink.

Early detection is vital. The MFS urges householders to combine the above safety tips with photo-electric smoke alarms that are less than 10 years old and a Home Fire Escape Plan.

**For media enquiries and interviews call the:**

**MFS Media Line on (08) 8204 3770 or Consumer and Business Services on 0422 007 069**

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