

Be safe around medical oxygen

Diminish the risk of fires and severe burns by banning smoking and open flames in your home

Being on medical oxygen requires many changes to your life and routine, and it's important that you don't forget to educate yourself about the additional fire risk posed by having oxygen in your home.

Oxygen itself is not flammable, but it's an essential ingredient for fire to start and sustain itself. The air around us typically contains 21 per cent oxygen, and we're used to seeing how fires react in this environment. But when oxygen levels are elevated, fires can gain intensity and grow rapidly. When pure medical oxygen is being used in a space, the overall oxygen level can increase, especially close to the source of the oxygen – generally a breathing apparatus. This additional oxygen can lead to a sudden surge in fire intensity.

The risks posed by oxygen-enriched fires are significant. As medical oxygen is fed through the nose and mouth, resulting fires can cause severe burns to the face and airways, leaving lasting scars or even death.

Simply put, there is no safe way to smoke in a home where medical oxygen is being used. If you have allowed smoking inside your home in the past, make sure all guests – or other residents in your home who may smoke – are fully aware that smoking is no longer permitted indoors.

In addition, pure oxygen can be absorbed by clothing, hair, blankets, upholstery and other items it comes into contact with, making them more prone to catch fire and burn intensely. This means that even if you remove the oxygen tubing to smoke, there's still a considerable risk that the oxygen absorbed by your clothing and hair could react with a cigarette or lighter's flame.

While smoking is the main culprit in medical oxygen fires, there are other sources of ignition in your home that should be eliminated. Do not light candles, incense or anything else that burns. It doesn't hurt to remove all matches and lighters in your home so you don't accidentally use one without thinking. There should be no open flames in your home, including gas cooktops in the kitchen. And when it comes time to celebrate a birthday, remember, no candles on the cake.