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Occupational Health and Safety

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Top 10 fire hazards and how to prevent them

Fire safety is an often-overlooked element in many workplaces until a disaster strikes. A fire can erupt in seconds and spread rapidly, leading to devastating injuries, property loss, and potential fatalities. According to the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), thousands of fire-related incidents are reported annually, many of which are preventable through proactive [hazard identification and risk assessment](#) to identify and manage best practices [1]. Understanding common fire hazards and implementing practical controls can drastically reduce the risk of fire-related emergencies.

[Basic firefighting course available](#) which includes the risks and prevention of lithium (solar battery) fires.

One of the most common fire hazards is **faulty electrical wiring and overloaded plug points**. In many aging buildings or budget-conscious institutions, electrical systems may be outdated or installed improperly, creating a serious risk of sparks and electrical fires. Extension cords used permanently or plugged into each other known as “daisy-chaining” can easily overheat and ignite [2]. Regular inspection by a qualified electrician and adherence to SANS 10142 standards for wiring and load capacity is essential.

Another critical hazard is **inadequate housekeeping and storage of combustible materials**. Many workplaces store cleaning chemicals, paper, cardboard, and flammable supplies in closets or storerooms without proper containment. Improper segregation of flammables from ignition sources increases fire risk significantly. Materials should be stored in well-ventilated, clearly labelled cabinets compliant with local fire and building regulations. All chemicals must be stored after due consideration of the chemicals safety data sheet and in accordance with the [Regulation for Hazardous Chemical Agents](#).

Kitchen and food preparation areas are particularly prone to fire, especially when equipment such as deep fryers, air fryers, stoves, or microwaves are left unattended or not regularly cleaned. Grease buildup in extractor fans is a hidden hazard that can rapidly accelerate a kitchen fire. Staff must be trained in basic kitchen fire safety, including how to use dry chemical extinguishers and fire blankets for Class B fires (flammable liquids and gasses) [3].

[Food health and safety online training course.](#)

Inadequate **maintenance of fire-fighting equipment** is a hazard in itself. Fire extinguishers that are expired, discharged, or blocked can render your fire safety plan useless during an emergency. According to the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHS Act) and applicable regulations, fire extinguishers should be inspected monthly an employee suitably trained and serviced annually by registered professionals [4].

[Checklists for appointment employee to check DCP extinguisher, CO2 extinguisher, Vermiculite extinguisher, hose reel and hydrants.](#)

[Appointment for the workplace firefighter](#)

Blocked or improperly marked emergency exits are another major issue. It is not uncommon to see storerooms, offices or venues with exit doors blocked by desks, boxes, or filing cabinets. In an evacuation scenario, these obstructions can delay escape and result in tragic outcomes. Emergency exits must always be kept clear, unlocked during occupied hours, and marked with photoluminescent signage compliant with SANS 1186 standards [5].

Lack of fire safety training among staff and contractors is a silent hazard. Fire drills should be conducted quarterly to ensure everyone knows their role during an evacuation. Designated fire marshals must be trained in extinguisher use, people movement, and headcounts. A 2022 audit by the City of Cape Town found that fewer than 35% of schools conducted fire drills annually [6].

[Online training course for basic firefighting and emergency action planning.](#)

Another hidden danger lies in **unauthorized electrical appliances** brought from home. Heaters, kettles, and fans especially those without surge protection pose a real threat. Clear policies should be in place outlining which appliances are allowed and plug points and breakers must be labelled accordingly to prevent misuse [7].

Poorly maintained heating systems or the use of open-flame heaters in winter months can also lead to fires. Many workplaces may rely on portable gas heaters or paraffin stoves, especially during load-shedding. These should be avoided unless absolutely necessary and replaced with safer alternatives where possible. If used, they must be placed away from curtains, paper, and walkways [8].

Smoking in prohibited areas or improper disposal of cigarette butts remains a concern in many workplaces. Clear signage, designated smoking areas, and fire-safe receptacles are crucial, especially near combustible vegetation or wooden structures [9].

Finally, **arson and vandalism** can never be ruled out. Unmonitored buildings, poor fencing, or lack of CCTV coverage increase the risk of intentional fires. Proper security measures, lighting, and reporting systems can mitigate this threat and ensure early detection [10].

In conclusion, the best fire safety strategy is a proactive one. Regular risk assessments, staff training, and strict adherence to South African National Standards (SANS) and the OHS Act are vital. Businesses bear a moral and legal responsibility to safeguard all occupants from fire-related hazards.

References:

1. South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), Annual Fire Safety Report, 2022.
2. Department of Labour SA, "Electrical Safety in the Workplace," OHS Guidelines, 2021.
3. City of Johannesburg EMS, "Fire Safety in Kitchens," Public Awareness Campaign, 2022.
4. Occupational Health and Safety Act, South Africa, Section 38, Firefighting Equipment Maintenance.
5. SANS 1186: "Photoluminescent Safety Signs," South African National Standards.
6. City of Cape Town Disaster Risk Management Centre, Fire Drill Compliance Audit Report, 2022.
7. Independent Electrical Contractors SA, "Safe Use of Appliances in Workplaces," Technical Bulletin, 2023.
8. SA Energy Safety Council, "Portable Heating Devices and Fire Risks," Public Safety Brief, 2021.
9. Department of Health, "Smoking and Fire Risks in Work Environments," National Smoking Policy, 2020.
10. South African Police Service (SAPS), "School Arson Cases: Trends and Prevention," Internal Security Memo, 2023.

Should you require further assistance or advice feel free to email us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

				
Occupational health and safety auditing and consulting		Online safety shop		
				
Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	Online	Onsite Excluding travel
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00
Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R810.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/	
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
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Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	

ONSITE TRAINING
First Aid Courses:

Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days
Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days
Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
Basic Ladder Safety	6 hours
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	6 hours
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	1 day