

Gas heating - health and safety issues

Gas heaters need to be professionally installed and properly looked after by a qualified and registered service agent, or gas heating specialist. An unsafe heater can cause a house fire or pollute your home with dangerous fumes. If you have your heater regularly serviced and use it correctly, it should be safe and economical to use.

Servicing gas heaters

Professional servicing, including inspection of the flue or chimney, is recommended. You should get your heater serviced:

- immediately if there is any sign of trouble
- every two years (before the winter heating season), or more often if recommended in the appliance manufacturer's instructions.

Manufacturers and suppliers usually have recommended service agents. You can use these if you wish. You can also enquire with your gas company or check the Yellow Pages (under 'h' for heating). If you do obtain a gas heating specialist from the Yellow Pages, make sure that they are a licensed gasfitter endorsed for gas appliance servicing.

Do-it-yourself gas heater cleaning

Beyond regularly having the heater serviced by a service agent, limited cleaning of the heater can be done by the owner to reduce odours or fumes, including vacuuming out any duct registers as necessary (the register is the central heating duct opening in each room, which can be seen when the cover grill is lifted).

Leave the cleaning of filters and fans on gas heaters to licensed gasfitters.

How to use a gas heater safely

Always follow the operating instructions on the appliance or in the manual if you have one.

You should always:

- Have plenty of ventilation – never seal up doorways, windows or vents. Ventilation is very important as it allows fresh air to come in and fumes to go out.
- Prevent young children and elderly people from touching very hot surfaces. The normal dress guard only protects against accidental clothing contact.
- Be careful when drying clothes inside – keep all flammable materials at least one metre away from the heater.

You should NEVER:

- use an unflued gas heater in a bathroom, bedroom or caravan. Toxic gases may cause serious health problems in these situations
- use or store solvents, aerosols or pressure pack cans near a gas heater – even if the heater is turned off, the pilot light may still be on
- dispose of rubbish such as tissues, cotton buds or other things in a gas fire – this can affect combustion and produce dangerous pollutants
- use an outdoor appliance inside (this includes barbeques and patio heaters).

Signs of a faulty gas heater

A faulty gas heater can cause serious problems. Health problems that seem to be worse, or only occur when the heating is on, may be caused by carbon monoxide from a faulty gas heater.

Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include:

- tiredness
- shortness of breath
- headaches
- dizziness
- nausea
- weakness
- confusion
- chest pain.

High levels of carbon monoxide are very dangerous and may cause people to pass out or even die. If you suspect you may be affected by carbon monoxide, open windows and doors, turn off the appliance and go outside to fresh air. See your doctor and ask whether your symptoms may be related to carbon monoxide.

When to check your gas heater

Your heater needs to be checked if:

- there is a yellow or sooty flame (unless it is a decorative gas log fire)
- the pilot light goes out unexpectedly, or 'pops' or 'bangs' when lighting
- there are signs of heat damage such as discoloration of the walls or heater panels
- the walls become too hot to touch while the heater is on
- there are soot stains around the heater.

Replace an out-of-date gas heater

Heaters do not last forever. Remember that:

- **Old heaters** – some heaters cannot be repaired for safety reasons and, sometimes, spare parts are not available for older heaters. If your heater is very old (around 15 to 20 years), it may not be possible or worthwhile for your service person to repair it.
- **Old unflued gas heaters** – (only allowed by law in homes supplied by an LPG (liquid petroleum gas) cylinder or tank if they meet strict installation requirements.) These heaters do not meet current emission standards. You should consider replacing these heaters if they are more than 10 years old, or you feel that your health is being affected by them. By law, an existing flueless LPG space heater must only be replaced by an LPG flueless heater that meets very stringent emission conditions.

Extra safety tips

- Always make sure that a patio heater is stable or fixed.
- Never use or store a gas cylinder indoors.
- Never use an industrial-type heater in a domestic situation.

Where to get help

- Energy Safe Victoria Tel. 1800 652 563
- Department of Health (Environmental Health Unit) Tel. 1300 761 874
- Your doctor
- Licensed gasfitter
- Plumbing Industry Commission (to check that you're dealing with a licensed gasfitter) Tel. 1300 815 127

Things to remember

- If you service your heater regularly and use it correctly, it should be safe and economical to use.
- Some older heaters cannot be repaired for safety reasons and should be replaced.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DH - RHP&R - Health Protection - Environmental Health Unit

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