



MEDIA RELEASE

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Wheat Bags Safety Plea

Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service is urging people to be cautious if they are buying wheat bags as a stocking filler this Christmas, particularly if they are for an elderly friend or relative.

Wheat bags, heated in microwave ovens, have for many years been used as a way of bringing warmth and therapeutic pain relief, particularly for aching joints. But if not used properly these bags can be a potential a killer! In mid-December 2009, a Worcestershire resident contacted the Fire Service after a heated wheat bag fell out of bed, landed on the floor and badly scorched the carpet and floorboards.

Overheated wheat bags present as much of a fire risk as unattended electric blankets. Wheat bags bought in shops should have manufacturers' instructions with recommended maximum heating times - there is a real fire risk if the instructions aren't followed or the heating times are exceeded.

The unique structure of the wheat grain allows it to warm up fast and then slowly release its heat. But as the bag is used regularly and begins to age, it may eventually be overheated to the point of ignition and if the bag is kept insulated - for instance being placed under bed clothes - it has increased potential to ignite.

Homemade bags pose an even greater risk because the type of wheat may be unknown and there are no manufacturers' instructions to follow.

Paul Amos, Area Manager Community Risk at Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, said:

"Wheat bags can bring relief and comfort to you when you use them properly. As with any product involving heat, there is a danger of fire and a risk of injury to you if you do not use it properly. People need to be aware of the risks. It's often vulnerable elderly people that use these to keep them warm at night and they need to be extra careful."

If you are already using a wheat bag follow these simple do's and don'ts.

Do:

- Buy wheat bags with clear heating instructions.
- Read and follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- Buy bags that include manufacturers' contact details in case you have a problem.
- Watch for overuse - a smell of burning or charring.
- Leave to cool in a safe area and on a non-combustible surface like a kitchen sink.

Don't:

- Use wheat bags as bed warmers.
- Overheat (recommended maximum is 3 minutes for most manufacturers).
- Reheat the bag until it has completely cooled (which may be two hours).
- Leave the microwave unattended when heating.
- Store the bag until it is cold.
- Use the bag if you see any evidence of problems.

Area Manager Amos concluded:

"With the weather getting colder, this warning about wheat bags is really important to ensure we're not faced with a wheat bag tragedy this Christmas or New Year."