

Fire safety outdoors - barbecues, camping, countryside

Fire safety shouldn't stop when you leave your home. Carelessness outdoors can have fatal results. Barbecues, camping and caravanning all pose fire hazards which can destroy areas of countryside and delicate ecosystems. Dry ground in the summer adds to the dangers but care should be taken all year round.

COVID-19 update

During the COVID-19 crisis and the current dry weather, no one should start a fire in the countryside and place further strain on the emergency services.

There have been several wildfire incidents over recent weeks which have threatened property and destroyed valuable habitats. Wildfires are rarely natural. They are almost always started either deliberately, or by reckless burning or disposal of flammable vegetation or waste material. Waste or litter might also contain glass, which can easily start a fire on a sunny day.

Take extreme caution because wildfires could result in tragedy for people caught in the line of a fire – don't burn waste or vegetation and don't fly-tip or drop litter.

Farmers and land managers are urged to halt all prescribed burning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic to help reduce additional pressures on Northern Ireland's emergency services.

Countryside safety - wildfires

While carefully planned and controlled fires (which usually take place between 1 September to 14 April) can be used by farmers to improve their land for grazing, many wildfires start due to carelessness, for example people discarding lit cigarettes or leaving campfires unattended. Deliberate setting of wildfires is illegal and is a criminal offence.

How to reduce the risk of wildfires

Follow these tips to reduce the risks of wildfires in the countryside:

- extinguish cigarettes and other smoking materials properly
- never throw cigarette ends out of car windows – they can ruin whole fields of crops
- don't leave bottles or glass in woodlands – sunlight shining through glass can start fires - take them home or put them in a waste or recycling bin

- only use barbecues in a suitable and safe area and never leave them unattended
- avoid using open fires in the countryside

Permission for outdoor fires

A fire in the open can easily get out of control. You should always check with the landowner first whether fires and barbecues are permitted on their land and only light fires in safe, designated areas. Children should always be kept away from an open fire.

What to do if you see a fire

If you see a fire in the countryside:

- report it immediately to the Fire and Rescue Service
- do not try to tackle the fire if it can't be put out with a bucket of water – leave the area as quickly as possible, and preferably move downhill as a fire will spread more quickly uphill

If you see someone setting a fire, report it immediately to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

Wildfires put lives at risk

They can result in tragedy because they:

- put people in the line of the fire at risk, including people lighting the fire, walking or camping in the local area and those living nearby
- endanger the firefighters who tackle them
- put the lives of the local community at risk as dealing with these types of incidents can mean firefighters are diverted from other emergencies

Cost of wildfires

As well as the large monetary cost spent on fighting wildfires, they can also destroy valuable timber, increase the treatment costs for drinking water and cause farmers to lose livestock and grazing lands.

Wildfires make the countryside less attractive and enjoyable for people to visit and can destroy the wildlife living there:

- nests and the young of birds that nest on the ground are destroyed
- mammals such as red squirrel lose their forest homes
- small animals like the common lizard are killed
- landscapes are scorched and less attractive until they recover
- peatland can be damaged and that is important as a carbon store to help combat climate change

Find out more about the consequences of starting a wildfire:

Barbecue safety

To barbecue safely and avoid injuries or damage to property, follow this advice:

- make sure your barbecue site is flat and away from fences, trees, shrubs and sheds
- keep a bucket of water or a garden hose nearby in case of emergencies
- never use petrol or paraffin to start or revive your barbecue - use firelighters or starter fuel on cold coals
- keep children, garden games and pets away from the cooking area
- never leave the barbecue unattended
- concentrate on what you're doing as it's easy to get distracted when you have family and friends around
- after cooking, make sure the barbecue is cool before moving it
- make sure ashes are cold before you get rid of them
- don't leave disposable barbecues on grass or wooden benches as they stay very hot after use
- drinking alcohol increases the risk of accidents happening

Tips for gas barbecues

- make sure your barbecue is in good working order
- make sure the gas tap is turned off before changing the cylinder and always change the cylinder in open air
- when you've finish cooking, turn off the gas cylinder before you turn off the barbecue controls - this ensures that any gas in the pipeline is used up

If you suspect a leak to the gas cylinder or pipework, don't use it until it's been inspected or repaired by a qualified person.

How you store the gas cylinders for your barbecue is also important. Keep gas cylinders outside, away from direct sunlight and frost. Don't keep more cylinders than you need. Don't store cylinders under the stairs in your house because if there's a fire, the stairs are likely to be your escape route.

Camping safety

Follow these precautions while camping to reduce the risk of fire:

- make sure that caravans and tents are at least six metres apart
- make sure you know the firefighting arrangements on the camp site
- if you don't have a mobile phone then find out where the nearest phone is located

- keep a torch handy for emergencies - don't use a lit candle
- find out what firefighting arrangements are in place for the campsite

Fire safety in caravans and mobile homes

If you stay in a tent

- always cook outside and well away from your tent, no matter how large
- keep your cooking area clear of flammable material, including long grass
- keep cooking appliances away from the walls and roof and anywhere they can easily be knocked over
- store flammable liquids and gas cylinders outside the tent and away from children
- don't smoke inside tents
- don't use candles or have any kind of flame burning apparatus in or near to a tent - torches are safer
- keep matches and lighters out of children's reach
- a fire can destroy a tent in 60 seconds so it's essential you have an escape plan and be prepared to cut your way out of your tent if there is a fire
- make sure everyone knows how to put out a clothing fire - stop, drop to the floor and roll to put out the flames

If there's a fire

- get everyone out immediately
- telephone the fire and rescue service and give the exact location - give a map reference if possible or provide a nearby landmark, such as a farm or pub
- if somebody else's clothes catch fire, tell or force them to drop and try to smother the flames with a blanket or large item of clothing to quell the flames, then get them to roll