



PUBLIC SAFETY BULLETIN

For Immediate Release
August 26, 2009

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

FAULTY COMPUTER EQUIPMENT CAN BE DEADLY

VICTORIA – Following the completion of an investigation into the circumstances surrounding a fatal fire six months ago, the BC Coroners Service (BCCS) is cautioning British Columbians about leaving laptop computers running on soft surfaces such as couches.

In B.C.'s first fatality attributed to a laptop fire, a 56-year-old Vancouver man died when a computer overheated and caught fire within 50 minutes of being left on a couch, plugged in and turned on. In the course of investigating, the Coroner's Service learned that several makes of laptops have been recalled in recent years due to problems with lithium-ion batteries overheating and bursting into flames.

Since 2004, four other laptops that either overheated or short-circuited when left plugged in have caused fires. In addition, there have been 15 fires caused by other electronic equipment short-circuiting or overheating, such as personal computers, DVD players, and cellphone chargers.

The BC Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) shares the concerns of the BCCS and both agencies advise people to do the following to ensure the safety of their homes and family:

- Always operate on a hard surface that allows ventilation. Soft materials can block the airflow vents and cause it to overheat. If it is not possible to avoid using a soft surface, an optional heat-sink base should be used to maintain cooling.
- Always shut down your laptop, even for short periods of time, especially when placed in a carry bag.
- Inspect and clean the air vents on a weekly basis. Forced-air dusters can be used to keep the vents clean and free from debris.
- Replace any equipment or parts that do not work according to manufacturer specifications and standards.
- Using a laptop desk or cooler will prevent you from being burned when using your laptop. A good laptop desk will have large enough vents for allowing air circulation between you and the laptop.
- Visit the Health Canada recall listings website at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/cps-spc/index-eng.php> or call 1-866-662-0666 to see if a laptop you own, or if you are considering purchasing a second-hand or rebuilt model, has been recalled.
- Review the manufacturers' website for additional safety tips and recommended maintenance.

The BCCS is committed to conducting a thorough, independent examination of the factors contributing to death, and may provide recommendations to prevent a similar death in the future, in order to improve community safety and quality of life in British Columbia.

The OFC is the senior fire authority in the province with respect to fire safety and prevention. Services include fire investigation and public fire safety education.

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