

# Gadget overload can cause fires

By ADAM TURNER - The Age

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If you have a swag of new electrical gadgets under the tree this Christmas, remember that overloading power boards is a recipe for Yuletide disaster. While the kitchen is traditionally considered the fire danger zone, the lounge room is the new hot spot and is now the source of one in five house fires.

It's not surprising, considering the boom in computing and home-entertainment gear. The situation seems to be worsening, with residential fires increasing by 8.3 per cent this winter compared with 2008.

It's always safer to use a power board rather than piggyback double adaptors.

Even so, power boards become dangerous when they are overloaded with appliances or piggybacked with double adaptors or other power boards.

They can also gather dust when tucked away out of sight under furniture such as beds and desks, which presents a fire risk if an electrical failure occurs.

It's also dangerous to run electrical cords under carpets or rugs.

The fire brigade recommends power boards with surge protectors be used and that appliances such as large televisions, fridges and air-conditioners, which draw a lot of power, not be plugged into a power board with other appliances.

Some high-end power boards with surge protectors are designed specifically for home-entertainment appliances, such as Belkin's PureAV range.

They're designed to protect against power spikes as well as interference from other electrical gear. Such power boards often come with a "Connected Equipment Warranty", in case attached appliances are damaged by a power surge, but such warranties are void if you use the power board with an extension cord, double adaptor or second power board.

As your home fills up with more gadgets, the solution is not to piggyback power boards but rather to call in a qualified electrician to install more power points. The lounge room is an obvious candidate for a power-point overhaul, as the traditional double power point behind the television just isn't enough now.

Also consider adding some power points on the other side of the room near the couch, so you don't have to string power boards and extension cords across the floor if you use your notebook while watching the television.

The home study or office is another likely candidate for a power-point overhaul because, for most people, it's a spare bedroom with one power point running a wide range of computing equipment. The kitchen bench is probably also home to a power board or two. Along with the traditional toaster and electric kettle, many kitchen benches now include a microwave oven, electric grill and coffee machine.

There's also a "maker" for every occasion, ready to jump into action if you want to make bread, pies, waffles, doughnuts, popcorn, hot dogs, milkshakes, ice-cream or toasted sandwiches. Add to this a few mobile phone chargers and you have a lot of power-hungry devices.

Installing more power points is obviously something you should never tackle yourself.

You should always use a registered electrical contractor, says the chief executive of Master Electricians Australia, Malcolm Richards.

"Your electrician can provide advice on any requirements to upgrade your home wiring or circuits if you are installing extra power points," Mr Richards says. "Ensure the REC (contractor) knows what you will be using the power points for so they can plan your system to cater for it.

"If your house is over 25 years old, I'd also recommend getting the wiring in the entire home checked.

"Safety switches are the best protection money can buy, as they'll cut the power if an electrical fault occurs. You should consider getting them installed on all light and power circuits. It's best to have more than one safety switch. You can identify a safety switch by noting whether it has a test button."

Mr Richards also recommends having a surge protector fitted to the fuse box to protect electronic equipment from power surges or lightning strikes.

If you have had home insulation installed recently, ask the contractor to check that any downlights have the right clearance around them to avoid a fire.