Dear Alice,

I've heard all sorts of bad things about the use of electric heating blankets. I've become quite fond of mine and would like to know if in fact there are any health related concerns I should be aware of.

Thanks,

— Snug as a bug

Answer

Dear Snug as a bug,

An electric heating blanket can be warm and comforting during those cold and wintry months, if properly used and maintained. However, when the recommended precautions aren't followed, these cozy blankets could contribute to a higher risk of injury and fires. There are also concerns about users being exposed to electromagnetic fields, though research indicates that the risk is likely minimal (more on this later). Though there are some potential risks involved in using these products, understanding the products, their associated risks, and what to do to prevent them can help you safely enjoy your heating blanket.

There are two types of heating blankets on the market: under blankets (also called heating pads) that are placed directly on the mattress, and over blankets, which are treated like traditional blankets you'd snuggle under. When used at the same time, electric under- and over- blankets can pose a significant fire hazard. So, it's recommended to use them one at a time. Most manufacturers also advise against using a heating blanket on waterbeds, sofas, bunk beds, or mechanical beds due to the risk involved with combining electrical wiring with flammable fabrics. Checking your product’s label, directions, or manufacturer’s website can provide more details regarding material, maintenance, and any additional recommendations.

Another concern with heating blankets is that they may get too hot or if kept on one area of the body for too long, they may cause burns. This is especially a concern for infants, the elderly, diabetics, or anyone who might have difficulty feeling hot temperatures or moving quickly if the
blanket gets too hot. Warming up your bed with the blanket before bedtime and then turning it off before going to sleep may help prevent burns and fire hazards since most models don't automatically shut off when reaching a potentially dangerous high temperature.

Periodically ensuring that your blanket is in working condition may also keep you on the safe side of warmth. In addition to following the manufacturer’s instructions, it may also help to keep the following tips in mind:

- Look for blankets that have been tested and approved by a nationally-recognized testing agency that has no stake in the blanket company’s sales. In the U.S., it’s advised to only use electric heating blankets that have the Underwriters Laboratories (UL) mark, indicating that the product has been safety tested.
- Replace worn or cracked heating blankets. Check that there are no scorch marks, discolorations, or frayed electric cords on the blanket — they’re all indicative of damaged wiring.
- Replace old blankets even if they still appear in working order. Blankets that are ten years or older account for 99 percent of all electric blanket fires.
- Make sure all wires and attachments fit snugly and properly. Loose wiring can cause fires.
- Never use a wet electric heating blanket, and don’t wash electrical blankets that are not approved for machine or hand washing.
- Replace blankets that contain displaced or damaged embedded heating wires. Check by holding the blanket up to light.
- Don’t fold or ball up the blanket when it’s turned on. Doing so can concentrate heat unevenly, increasing the risk of burns.
- When storing the blanket, roll it up or fold it gently and with as few creases as possible — better yet, hang it up to avoid wire damage.
- Don’t lay on top of an over blanket; this can cause electrical wire damage and cause injury or create a fire hazard.
- Never dry clean a heating blanket because the chemicals used in the dry cleaning process can damage heating insulation and increase fire risk.
- To avoid fire hazards, keep the blanket off when you’re out of the room or not actively using it.

One health concern you might have heard is that the electromagnetic fields present in electric heating blankets may increase cancer risk. However, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) [2], evidence supporting these links are “highly controversial” because electric blankets present very low exposure levels so any risk would be extremely small. Nevertheless, WHO recommends that pregnant women avoid any potential risk whatsoever and discontinue heating blanket use while pregnant.

Lastly, if you’re looking for a non-electric option, there are many alternatives to heating blankets that you could consider that may help you stay warm and cozy. Try using flannel or fleece sheets, adding extra blankets, or wearing socks to bed. However, if you’re not interested in breaking up with your cozy electric cover, make sure to follow the manufacturer’s instructions and recommended safety tips to keep you and yours warm and out of harm’s way.

Alice!
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