

UK Whirlpool recall highlights threat to millions from defective domestic appliances

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Whirlpool recently announced the recall of 519,000 models of washing machines sold to UK customers because they pose a potential fire hazard. The appliances were manufactured between 2014 and 2018 under the Hotpoint and Indesit brands, since taken over by Whirlpool.

As of December 17, 39 different Hotpoint models and three Indiset models were listed as affected by the problem. Whirlpool also owns the Creda, Swan and Proline brands.

The American-based transnational, which employs 92,000 globally and sells 68 million appliances a year, said safety engineers discovered a fault in the door lock system. When the heating element in the washing machine activates, the locking mechanism can overheat, posing a fire risk.

Not only washing machines, but tumble dryers, cookers, fridges, freezers—everyday household items often taken for granted—are turning the homes of millions of people around the world into death traps.

Governments have long known about the dangers but have covered up for manufacturers to aid their voracious drive for profit.

In 2015, the Consumers' Association magazine *Which?* reported malfunctioning household appliances caused almost 12,000 fires in the UK from 2011-2014.

It reported fire statistics revealing 3,203 household fires solely due to faulty appliances in a single year between April 2016 and March 2017. *Which?* found washing machines, tumble dryers and dishwashers the most likely culprits, followed by cookers, fridge/freezers and everyday electrical appliances.

In 2018, *Which?* revealed that faulty appliances accounted for 60 house fires a week in Britain—figures obtained from freedom of information (FOI) requests. These appliances are now the second main cause of fires in the home after cooking.

Whirlpool also withdrew 500,000 tumble dryers in July this year, citing risk of fire. The problem affecting more than 600 models of vented and condenser tumble dryers was isolated to an accumulation of fluff that could fall onto the heating element during operation.

The company has known about the fault for years, after a spate of fires associated with its Hotpoint, Indesit, Creda, Swan and Proline brands—sold for 11 years from 2004.

Last month, a report by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Committee investigating Whirlpool's record, noted that the firm said this year that the actual number of faulty tumble dryers in homes across the country could be 800,000. By November, just 65,000 machines had been either replaced or modified since the recall notice, meaning that up to 735,000 faulty machines may still be in use.

In November 2015, Whirlpool revealed fire risks with 5.3 million dryers sold in the UK between April 2004 and September 2015. These dangerous appliances were also sold throughout Europe—in Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

Customers were advised to continue using the faulty dryers but not when they were out or in bed until they had been modified! A year later, tragedy almost struck when a dryer caused a fire in the Garnham family

home in Guildford, burning the house down. Fortunately, the family were up and escaped unharmed.

In August 2016, the Defreitas family had a similar experience, escaping with their lives from their seventh-floor flat in Shepherd's Bush London after their faulty Indesit tumble dryer caught fire. Flames enveloped the side of the 18 storey Shepherd's Court high rise building and 100 families escaped with their lives. As with the Grenfell inferno, the flames rapidly took hold outside the building as it was covered in flammable cladding.

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) found that the cladding panels comprised a 17-23mm plywood board, covered by blue polystyrene foam and a 1mm steel sheet. The fire melted away the polystyrene foam, causing the metal sheet to fall and exposing the foam and wood to the flames. The LFB said this is "likely" to have occurred to the panels above the flat where the fire started, as flaming droplets fell and the flames spreading upward. Experts investigating the blaze concluded it was "likely to have assisted the fire in spreading up the outside of the building, as this mechanism progressively exposes a plywood surface to a developing fire."

Whirlpool did their utmost to avoid recalling the lethal machines, instead opting for risk assessment and repair—adding a widget to the product so fluff and the heating element never came into contact.

A BBC investigation by journalist Kevin Peachey, "The Danger in our Homes," published emails obtained by FOI requests between the company and Peterborough Council's Trading Standards department.

One email asked: "...[a] further question from the Whirlpool side if I may—is there a way at all of possibly weaving into this sentence in any way that: 'this is not a recall campaign...'"

The response from trading standards was to comply, replying, "The initial advice that we gave was based on a risk assessment which deemed the level of risk to customers to be low... we acted within government regulations at all times."

But even after modifications, dryers still caught fire.

Another fault emerged at an inquest in 2017 into the October 2014 deaths in a house fire in Wales of Bernard Hender, 19 and Doug McTavish, 39. Whirlpool declared their dryer ignited due to "spontaneous combustion."

Assistant Coroner David Lewis concluded the cause of the fire was "on the balance of probabilities" an electrical fault with the door switch on the dryer. Forensic evidence revealed an issue with the protection of the wiring and fluff getting into the door switch.

On December 18, a man suffered burns after his Indesit dryer burst into flames, igniting aerosol cans which triggered an explosion causing a wall in his home to collapse. He is reported to be recovering in hospital.

A committee of MPs concluded in a 2018 report that the defect in these dryers resulted in at least 750 fires in the UK since 2004. The response of Whirlpool was "woefully inadequate." The report noted Whirlpool used "chilling" non-disclosure agreements "to silence customer" as a condition for a refund/replacement.

A faulty Whirlpool-branded freezer was responsible for a fire which caused six fatalities in 2011. Muna Elmufatish, 41, her daughters Hanin Kua, 14, Basma, 13, Amal, nine, and sons Mustafa, five, and Yehya, two, died in a fire in their home in London. Bassam Kua desperately tried to rescue his wife and children but only he and daughter Nur survived.

“By the time a smoke alarm goes off, you still may not have much time—and your reaction times are slower if you are asleep,” commented then LFB Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Charlie Pugsley. The LFB launched a total recall campaign of known faulty appliances. Fridges and freezers are of major concern because they are switched on 24 hours a day.

It was a fire in a defective fridge-freezer that started the Grenfell Tower inferno in London June 2017, killing 72. The fridge-freezer had plastic backing, though an investigation concluded the appliance carried a low fire risk. The fire had such catastrophic consequences because of the shoddy “refurbishment” of Grenfell, including wrapping the block in highly flammable cladding. *Which?* is calling for all fridges to be metal rather than plastic backed, as is the case in the US and Canada. The backing covers a layer of flammable insulation foam material, which when ignited gives off dangerous gases and thick, toxic smoke.

Charlie Pugsley, a fire investigator who was involved in the investigation into the causes of the Grenfell fire, likened the combination of plastic backing and insulation to a “solid block of petrol.”

When *Which?* performed tests using a naked flame, the plastic-backed fridge ignited within 30 seconds, emitting toxic fumes that can knock someone unconscious in seconds. According to firefighters such a fire would render a two-storey three-bed house “unable to support life within three minutes of a fire breaking out.”

Metal-backed products withstood an open flame for five minutes.

The UK authorities attempted to alter international standards so the safety of the plastic-backed models could not be challenged abroad. The British Standards test, far less rigorous than the *Which?* tests, involved a hot wire penetrating the fridge backing. According to the LFB, in the US, there is one injury for every 25 fridge-related fires, compared to one in five in the UK.

Though a new government safety standard was introduced this year requiring fridge backing to withstand an open flame for 30 seconds—making the manufacture of plastic-backed appliances less likely—manufacturers are busy selling off stocks of unsafe plastic-backed products.

Manufacturers are also avoiding fire-proof labelling products—making it difficult for fire investigators to name the product models responsible for fires—so unknown numbers of dangerous appliances remain on sale.

Between April 2016 and March 2017, there were more than 2,100 household fires where investigators were able to determine the faulty appliance that caused the fire, but not the brand or model number. These details were therefore only recorded for a third of the 3,203 fires caused by faulty appliances that year—a noticeable decrease from the three years previous.

The number of electrical products identified as faulty and unsafe is growing. B&Q has issued an urgent safety notice on a Cooke & Lewis slimline dishwasher sold between 2012 and 2017 because the model has components that could “overheat and result in a fire.”

British Gas engineers found 26,000 unsafe or dangerous gas and electric appliances while making home visits in the first seven months of this year. Problems were found most in boilers and cookers. *Which?* reported in September that there are a huge number of the USB chargers, travel adaptors and power banks with serious faults selling on sites including Amazon Marketplace, eBay, Wish and AliExpress. Almost three-quarters of the 33 unbranded products failed electrical safety tests. *Which?* reached the damning conclusion that “Dangerous products in Britain’s homes are putting millions of people at risk. Britain’s product safety regime is no

longer fit for purpose.”

Former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron is remembered for his promise in 2014, a year before taking office in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, to make a “bonfire” of regulations to eliminate red-tape governing safety standards. He pledged to “kill off” the “excessive health and safety... albatross around the neck of British businesses.”

Cameron started his career in politics, straight after leaving Oxford University, working as a researcher for the Conservative Research Department in 1988. In a briefing paper on the necessity to scale up the deregulation of business, he wrote, “The completion of the [European] single market will require a substantial volume of new community legislation... It is essential that this should not add unnecessarily to the burden of regulation on business.”

He warned, “Substantial deregulation in the UK is wasted if business is then wrapped in Euro red tape.”

Cameron quoted approvingly then Tory Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe, who said, “We need to see a Europe free of regulations, quotas, licences and restrictions, a bonfire of controls on a European scale even bigger and better than what we have seen in this country.”

Not only have regulatory bodies been cut, but they answer to governments which do the bidding of manufacturers. In 2015, the Cameron government set up a review into the system of recalling dangerous products, chaired by former presenter of BBC consumer programme *Watchdog*, Lynn Faulds-Wood. She later refused an MBE on the grounds that her main recommendation—for an agency to be set up akin to the Food Standards Agency in charge of product safety—were “kicked into the long grass.”

The key recommendations of the 2017 parliamentary report of the Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety did little to rectify this, other than setting up a government website listing faulty appliances that put the onus on the consumer to register products.

Whirlpool will not be offering repair or replacement of faulty washing machines until at least January. Customers have complained of difficulty contacting the company either online or by phone.

Nothing less than a moratorium on the production of faulty appliances is necessary, with free, safe replacements provided to all.

This latest scandal underlines the incompatibility of production for profit and consumer safety—which increasing international competition post-Brexit will compromise further. While millions are put in unnecessary danger by its products, the Whirlpool Corporation’s net earnings for the third quarter in 2019 shot to \$358 million, up from \$210 million for the same period last year.



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