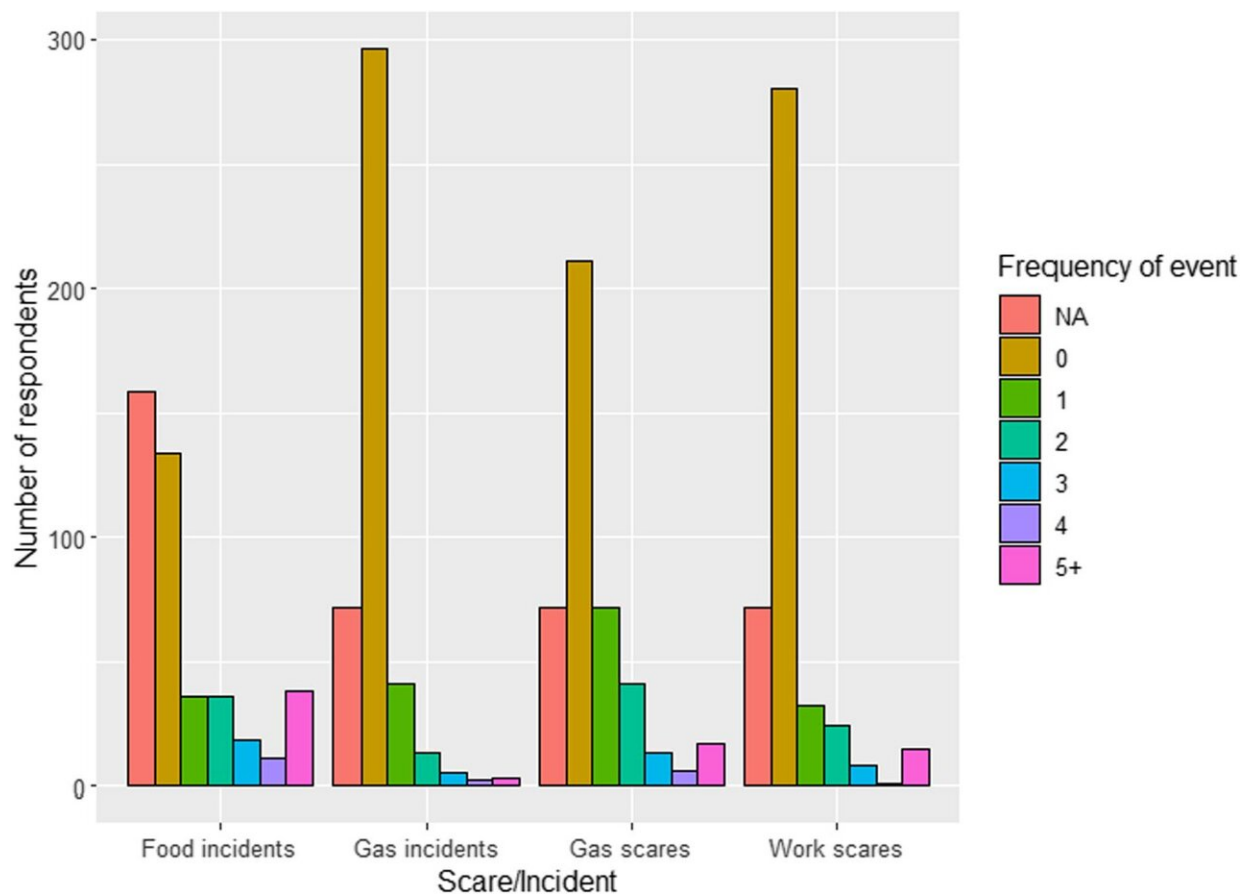


Dangers of smell impairment highlighted in new research

March 11 2024



Scares and incidents in the last 5 years. Credit: *European Archives of Oto-Rhino-Laryngology* (2024). DOI: 10.1007/s00405-024-08529-9

More than a third of people who self-identify as having a smell disorder have had at least one gas safety scare in the last five years, according to [new research](#) published in the *European Archives of Oto-Rhino-Laryngology*, titled "Impact of olfactory disorders on personal safety and well-being: a cross-sectional observational study."

The study, led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) in collaboration with the charity Fifth Sense, asked people who cannot smell well what safety concerns they had and if they had experienced any hazardous events.

A total of 432 people responded to the [online survey](#), which was conducted from February 25 to September 28, 2022, and distributed via the charity.

It revealed that a significant majority of participants (85.9%) are concerned about safety, particularly regarding [gas leaks](#), smoke, and spoiled food.

The study highlights that over five years, a substantial number of respondents encountered hazardous events related to their condition, emphasizing the impact of smell loss on [personal safety](#) and emotional well-being.

During the previous five years, 32.2% of respondents had experienced a safety concern related to food, 14.8% a gas incident in which someone was hurt, 34.5% a gas scare and 18.5% a safety incident at work.

Lead researcher Dr. Liam Lee said, "This study underscores the critical importance of addressing safety concerns for individuals with olfactory dysfunction.

"The findings show that smell loss significantly affects personal safety and emotional well-being. But we can help by finding ways to make things safer for them.

"We could teach people about the risks and make tools like 'scratch and sniff' cards to help them recognize dangerous smells."

Before 2020, more than three million people in the UK (5% of the population) were estimated to be affected by smell loss.

Now around a further one million people are also thought to have persistent problems following a COVID-19 infection.

Some people lose their sense of smell completely (anosmia). Others may experience a reduced sense of smell (hyposmia), unpleasant distorted smells (parosmia) or smell hallucinations (phantosmia).

These changes may be accompanied by loss of or changes to the sense of taste.

A total of 95 people who responded to the survey (22%) reported a COVID-19 infection as the cause of their olfactory dysfunction.

Co-author Professor Carl Philpott, of UEA's Norwich Medical School, said, "While most respondents reported not experiencing any adverse events, it's noteworthy that among those without any gas-related incidents, a common reason cited was the deliberate avoidance of living in environments with gas installations due to fear and anxiety of potential accidents."

Prof Philpott helped to found Fifth Sense with Duncan Boak, who is chief executive of the charity which supports people affected by smell and taste disorders.

Mr. Boak said, "This research highlights an important, yet unrecognized, public health issue with serious safety implications.

"Yet there are a lack of treatment options for these sensory impairments and only a handful of specialist smell and taste clinics in England, with none in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

"Another issue is that we don't routinely test the sense of smell which means that these problems often get missed with people not getting the care they need, or support and information to help them stay safe at home.

"I hope that our research serves as a prompt for policymakers and the NHS to start working with us to address what is a major health inequality."

In 2016, Hannah Martin experienced a gas scare that could have had serious consequences. The 32-year-old, who works in [financial services](#) and lives in Littlehampton, lost her sense of smell after a viral infection when she was 18.

However, she felt comfortable using all her family's gas appliances as she had always cooked with her mum from when she was very young.

She said, "This particular evening I was preparing dinner for my mum and I, I ensured the eye-level grill had lit and then turned my back in order to prepare the next part of the meal.

"I'm unsure how much time passed but all of a sudden, my mum came running down the stairs and yelled 'don't touch anything that may cause an ignition, I can smell gas all the way on the next floor up.'"

When they checked they found the grill had gone out and Hannah had no

idea, even though she had been in the kitchen the entire time.

Hannah said, "I felt horrified when this happened as if I had managed to blow up the kitchen, we have a household of five people on each side of us and there would've been no way to warn them at the time. The thought of injuring all those innocent people absolutely terrified me.

"The incident made me lose confidence in myself as from then on I always had to make sure that there was somebody in the kitchen with me if I planned to use any of our gas appliances to prevent it from happening again."

The scare led to her family finding the Fifth Sense charity, whose safety information they followed diligently, such as ordering detectors to keep Hannah and everyone in the household safe. It helped her to regain her confidence in the kitchen and be able to cook independently again.

She said, "It has majorly impacted my mental health and Fifth Sense's safety information has literally saved my life. My quality of life would not be what it is without the work that Duncan and his team do. My only regret is that I didn't find them sooner."

Fifth Sense is working in partnership with Cadent, the UK's largest gas distribution network, to highlight this issue and ensure that people with a poor, altered or no sense of smell have the information and support they need to stay safe and well at home.

Mark Belmega, Director of Social Purpose and Sustainability at Cadent, said, "It's really important that we help keep those with anosmia and other smell disorders, safe around gas.

"We know cases have increased following the COVID-19 pandemic and so we're proud to work in collaboration with Fifth Sense to amplify key

gas safety tips, including regularly servicing gas appliances, joining the Priority Services Register and getting gas and CO detectors fitted at home."

The researchers noted a limitation of the study was that the data was self-reported and there could also be a sampling bias of charity members who are already seeking support.

More information: Liam Lee et al, Impact of olfactory disorders on personal safety and well-being: a cross-sectional observational study, *European Archives of Oto-Rhino-Laryngology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s00405-024-08529-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00405-024-08529-9)

Provided by University of East Anglia

Citation: Dangers of smell impairment highlighted in new research (2024, March 11) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-03-dangers-impairment-highlighted.html>

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