

Laptop battery fire and explosion

Safety Flash Published on 30 October 2008 Generated on 28 January 2026 IMCA SF 16/08

A Member has reported an incident which highlights the potential hazards of the lithium-ion batteries used in laptop computers.

What happened?

The incident occurred offshore in the accommodation on A member's vessel. The batteries of a popular brand of laptop computer (Dell Inspiron 6000) exploded while that laptop was not in use (it was being charged at the time with an appropriate proprietary battery charger). The owner of the computer was present at the time of explosion. The person lifted up the computer and unplugged it immediately after flames and smoke came out. The batteries fell out of the computer on to the floor of the cabin, which suffered slight fire damage as a result. A fire extinguisher was then used on the smouldering batteries. The vessel fire alarm was triggered by the event. Personnel involved in the incident responded correctly; due to their actions an escalation was prevented. No one was injured.

It will be noted that laptop battery fires have happened on occasions in the past when Dell found it necessary to recall certain of its batteries because of the risk of explosion, fire and injury. Several other producers of laptops and the associated batteries – Sony, Toshiba, Apple, HP and Fujitsu – have all encountered similar problems.

Clearly the outcome of such a battery fire can be severe. In slightly different circumstances this incident could easily have resulted in a serious fire.

The following preventive actions have been suggested by the company:

- Never leave charging laptops unattended – either at home or at work.
- If you are not sure of your own laptop (battery) check the manufacturer's website or contact the store where it was bought for information.

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