

Chinese lanterns, or flying sky lanterns as they're also known, are increasingly growing in popularity in the UK. Used at celebrations, they're an alternative to fireworks and light up the night sky. But although the lanterns look pretty when released into the sky, are they safe for children to use and can they cause any other problems?

What is a Chinese Lantern?

As the name suggests, Chinese lanterns originated in China, where they've been used in traditional celebrations for thousands of years. A Chinese lantern is a form of lantern or light that is usually made from paper wrapped around a wire frame. Inside there's solid fuel or a small candle at the bottom of the lantern which is lit before the lantern is released into the sky.

The lanterns come in various shapes and sizes, from small to large, and are designed to fly from 5-20 minutes in the air. Lit Chinese lanterns are often used at celebrations such as Bonfire night, weddings, birthdays, memorials, anniversaries or other special events, and can create quite a spectacle when they're released en masse.

Safety Issues concerning Chinese Lanterns

While lit Chinese lanterns flying in the sky at night do look magical to those down below, there are some safety issues related to their use.

For a start, the use of burning Chinese lanterns has sparked several major false rescue incidents in the UK, wasting a lot of time and money from valuable services. When they're up in the sky, the lanterns can look like emergency flares, which has caused members of the public to call the emergency services and coastguards to think that people are in distress. In one incident, it was even a coastguard who mistook sky lanterns for flares and raised the alarm.

There is also the major safety problem that once a lantern is in the air, you can't control where it goes and you never know where a burning Chinese sky lantern is going to land. Although sky lantern manufacturers are keen to suggest that they are completely safe and will burn out before they land, in reality, that's not necessarily the case.

There have been incidents where children have suffered burns as the result of a sky lantern falling on them. While some lanterns are made from fire proof paper, others aren't, and the outside can catch fire very easily if they're not handled properly, putting parents and children at risk.

There have been several newsworthy cases where sky lanterns have landed and set fire to buildings, marquees, farmland or fields full of crops. There's also a problem with the metal that is mostly used as a frame for the outer part of the lantern to be wrapped around, and farm animals have been harmed by

the wire. Farmers have expressed concern over the issue of sky lanterns landing on farmland and are worried that the wire could damage their machinery or even get into animal feed.

Safety Points to Remember if Using Chinese Lanterns

Despite the calls from some campaign groups to ban the use of Chinese lanterns, they are still being sold and used widely. If you decide that you'd like to use them at a celebration, then here are some practical guidelines on safety points to keep in mind when using Chinese lanterns to help ensure children and adults are kept safe.

Do:

- Be careful where you choose to use Chinese lanterns. Ensure you're not close to the coast or anywhere where the light in the sky could get mistaken for an emergency flare.
- If you're letting off a large number at once at a large event or celebration, let the emergency services know in advance.
- Check the direction of the wind and don't launch lanterns in wind speeds higher than 5mph.
- Ensure that only adults light and launch Chinese lanterns, keeping children well out of the way.
- Ensure you have plenty of water to hand, in case lantern lighting goes wrong.
- Keep the launch area clear of flammable materials.

Don't:

- Set Chinese lanterns off near buildings, especially those with thatched roofs, woodland, farmland or heathland areas.
- Set lanterns off near major roads, motorways or airports.
- Set lanterns off in very dry weather, as there's an increased risk they could land and set fire to something.