- Lightning

COMMERCIAL DISTRIBUTION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED • PRINTED FROM PRESSREADER • NOT FOR SALE • PERSONAL COPY

IS IT REALLY TRUE THAT...

...lightning can reach you even inside a house?

"I know that you should not swim or seek shelter under a tree during lightning, but does a thunderstorm also present danger when you are indoors?"

NATURE Lightning neutralises voltage differences between Earth's surface and clouds. During lightning, the voltage difference can be hundreds of millions of volts, and the lightning delivers momentary amperage up to 200,000A, more than sufficient to kill a human being.

This knowledge, plus the rain, sees most of us seeking shelter when a thunderstorm is approaching. But it is true that even inside a house, there are dangers to be aware of.

Very few homes have lightning rods, so a strike must find its own way through the parts of the house with the least electrical resistance. Anything including metal will offer a potential pathway – roof antennas are an easy target and allow the strike deeper into your house; computers can be particularly sensitive to any massive power spike reaching the electricity supply.

But metal pipes and the water in the pipes can also provide a conductor. So while indoor lightning injuries are very rare compared with outdoor strikes, radiators and water taps connected to metal water pipes should be avoided during thunderstorms, as should bathing, hand washing, or washing up.

In 2001, Josephine Martine was blown out of her bath in England by a lightning strike; in 2008, Falicity Wishkeno of Kansas was hit by lightning while taking a shower, and in 1988, Eleanor Loux of Rhode Island was brushing her teeth when a bolt of lightning leapt out of her toilet. All three survived.

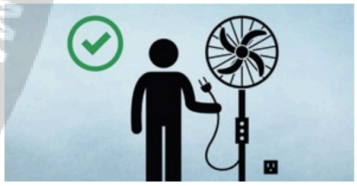


The safest place during a thunderstorm is indoors, but care should still be taken.

SHUTTERSTOCK

How to avoid lightning indoors

If lightning strikes your home, the electricity chooses the path with the least resistance to the ground, via metal or water.



UNPLUG KEY ELECTRONICS

1 A lightning strike could cause surges of voltage in electrical cables which can 'fry' connected electronics. Switch off and unplug (including the antenna) key appliances such as the TV.



STAY AWAY FROM WATER

2 Many water pipes are made of metal, so they conduct power, and so does the water in water taps. Any contact with water, from washing up to showers, is hence risky during a thunderstorm.

REMAIN OFFLINE

3 Antenna, phone and internet cables can conduct electricity (though fibre network cables cannot). Unplug sensitive devices such as computers, which are the most common lightning victims.