



USDA Photo

Fires and Food Safety

Fire! Few words can strike such terror. Residential fires are, unfortunately, a common occurrence. Some 2 million American homes are in flames yearly. In the aftermath of fire, people are left to salvage their lives and belongings.

Whether it's the whole house involved or just a fire in the kitchen, people try to save what they can—including food. But generally, saving food that's been in a fire is not a good idea.

Food exposed to fire can be compromised by three factors: the heat of the fire, smoke fumes, and chemicals used to fight fire.

Heat from the Fire

Food in cans or jars may appear to be okay, but if they've been close to the HEAT of a fire, they may no longer be safe.

Why? Heat from a fire can activate food spoilage bacteria. If the heat is extreme, the cans or jars themselves can split or rupture, rendering the food unsafe.

Fumes from a Fire

One of the most dangerous elements of a fire is sometimes not the fire itself, but TOXIC FUMES released from burning materials.

Those fumes can kill; they can also contaminate food. Any type of food stored in permeable packaging—cardboard, plastic wrap, etc.—should be thrown away. Toxic fumes can permeate the packaging and contaminate the food.

Discard any raw foods stored outside the refrigerator—such as potatoes or fruit—that could be contaminated by fumes.

Surprisingly, food stored in refrigerators or freezers can also become contaminated by fumes. The refrigerator seal isn't airtight and fumes can get inside.

If food from your refrigerator has an off-flavor or odor when it's prepared, throw it away.

Chemicals in Fires

Chemicals used to fight fires contain toxic materials and can contaminate food and cookware. The chemicals cannot be washed off the food.

Foods that are exposed to chemicals should be thrown away. This includes food stored at room temperature, such as fruits and vegetables, as well as foods stored in permeable containers like cardboard and screw-topped jars and bottles.

Canned goods and cookware exposed to chemicals can be decontaminated.

Wash in a strong detergent solution. Then dip in a bleach solution (1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water) for 15 minutes.

Fire Stoppers

The American Red Cross recommends that you:

- Make your home fire-safe by installing battery-powered smoke detectors on each floor and in the garage. Test the detectors twice a year and keep a working fire extinguisher in the kitchen.
- Plan two emergency escape routes from each room in the house. Have rope or chain ladders for upstairs rooms. Agree on where to meet after the family escapes.
- Have your own practice fire drills. Instruct everyone to crawl low under smoke.

For more information, contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline or one of these other government sites.

CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- Call 1-800-CDC-INFO or 1-800-232-4636, TTY 1-888-232-6348, for information on hazards, safe clean up, and preventing illness and injury. Available in English and Spanish, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. www.cdc.gov

FDA: Food and Drug Administration

- For information on safe food handling for foods other than meat, poultry, or egg products, call FDA's toll-free information line at 1-888-SAFEFOOD or 1-888-723-3366. www.cfsan.fda.gov
- FDA emergency number, staffed 24 hours a day, 1-866-300-4374

Other

- Environmental Protection Agency - EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline: 1-800-426-4791 www.epa.gov
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): Food and Water in an Emergency www.fema.gov

General Disaster Assistance Site:

www.foodsafety.gov

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854); TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The Hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7.



AskKaren.gov