

Food Safety After a Fire

Fire! Few words can strike such terror. Residential fires are, unfortunately, a common occurrence. Some two 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. Follow the recommendations below in deciding which foods should be thrown out. Throw out any food that has an off-flavor or odor when it is prepared.

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 edible. 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. Throw out any raw food or any type of food stored in permeable packaging - cardboard, plastic wrap, screw-topped jars and bottles, etc. - even if it was stored in the refrigerator. The refrigerator seal isn't airtight and fumes can get inside.

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.

Cookware exposed to fire-fighting chemicals can be decontaminated by washing in soap and hot water. Then submerge for 15 minutes in a solution of 1 tablespoon unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water.

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.

Source:

USDA/FSIS (2006). *Keeping Food Safe During an Emergency*.
http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/keeping_food_Safe_during_an_emergency/index.asp

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Food Safety Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University. (New 04/99. Revised 02/07.)

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.