



Public Information

County of Ventura • Resource Management Agency • Environmental Health
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FOOD SAFETY AFTER A FIRE

Eating food that has been involved in a fire can be dangerous and may cause illness to you and your family. Do not try to save food after a fire.

Discard all food that has been near a fire. Food exposed to fire can be damaged by the heat of the fire, smoke fumes, and fire-fighting chemicals. These fumes and chemicals cannot be washed off. These include:

- Foods stored outside of the refrigerator, such as bread, fruits, and vegetables.
- Raw food or food in permeable packaging (cardboard, plastic wrap, etc.).
- All foods in cans, bottles, and jars. While they may appear to be okay, the heat from a fire can damage the containers and can activate food spoilage bacteria.
- Foods stored in refrigerators or freezers. Refrigerator seals are not airtight and fumes can get inside.

Food exposed to fire can be compromised by three factors:

1. **Heat from the Fire:**

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

2. **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.

These fumes can kill and can also contaminate food. Any unpackaged food or 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.

Food stored in refrigerators or freezers can also become contaminated by fumes. The refrigerator seal is not airtight and fumes can get inside.

3. **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 those with screw-caps, snap-lids, crimped caps, twist caps, flip tops, and snap- open, and home-canned foods because they cannot be disinfected. Throw away food in cardboard containers, including juice/milk/baby formula boxes.

Power Outage:

Even if your home was not directly damaged by fire, extended power outages have occurred. Discard all foods in your refrigerator and freezer.

Reheating food that has become contaminated will not make it safe!

Never taste food to determine its safety.

When in doubt, throw it out!

Document food and other items that are disposed of for insurance purposes by listing and/or taking photographs.

REMOVING ODORS FROM REFRIGERATORS AND FREEZERS

The following steps may have to be repeated several times:

- Dispose of all food.
- Remove shelves, crispers, and ice trays. Wash them thoroughly with hot water and detergent. Then rinse with a sanitizing solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water.
- Wash the interior of the refrigerator and freezer, including the door and gaskets, with hot water and baking soda. Rinse with a sanitizing solution (see above).
- Leave the door open for about 15 minutes.

If odor remains, try any or all of the following:

- Wipe the inside of the unit with equal parts of vinegar and water to destroy mildew.
 - Leave the door open and allow to air out for several days.
 - Stuff the refrigerator and freezer with rolled newspapers. Keep the door closed for several days. Remove the newspaper and clean with vinegar and water.
 - Sprinkle fresh coffee grounds or baking soda loosely in a large, shallow container in the bottom of the unit.
 - Use a commercial product available at hardware and houseware stores. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.
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Note: If odors still remain, the unit may need to be discarded.

- Sanitize cookwear by washing in soap and hot water. Then submerge for 15 minutes in a solution for 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water.
 - Discard wooden cutting boards, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples, and pacifiers as there is no way to safely clean them.
 - Thoroughly wash metal pans, ceramic dishes, utensils (including can openers) with soap and water (hot water if available). Rinse and sanitize them by boiling in clean water *or* immersing them for 15 minutes in a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water.
 - Thoroughly wash countertops with soap and water (hot water if available). Rinse and then sanitize them by applying a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water. Allow to air-dry.
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