

The Ingredients for Cooking Without “Fires”

By Rebecca Booker

Spring Lake Park-Blaine-Mounds View Fire Department

Recently a fire department responded to a 911 call where a 29-year old man died when a grease fire engulfed the kitchen where he was cooking. Fire Investigators found cooking oil in a pan near a sink and believe the man tried to put out the grease fire with water, which actually increased the size of the fire.



It should make us all stop, and think about what our response would be in a cooking fire and even better, what the recipe is for preventing them. Heat, fuel and human error are central to nearly all fires and can be used to prevent this recipe for disaster.

Cooking is the leading cause of fires and fire injuries in structures in the U. S. 80% of fire deaths occur in the home. This does not have to happen. According to FEMA, there were an estimated 156,500 kitchen fires, 331 deaths, 4,914 injuries, and \$876 million in property loss. Although cooking fires occur in many property types, the overwhelming majority of them take place in residential structures. Over 89% of cooking fires occur in one- and two-family dwellings or in multifamily buildings such as apartments. Unattended cooking is the #1 cause of fires world-wide. Cooking fires follow no seasonal trend. They do follow a daily pattern. A noticeable peak in kitchen fires occurs at the 6pm. A secondary peak occurs at noon. Cooking materials, including food, were the material first ignited. Specifically, oil, fat, and grease were the leading types of material ignited in cooking fires. Oil and grease are highly flammable and can splatter or spill during cooking. Starches were the second most common material ignited, followed by plastics such as appliance casings or cooking utensils. Careless cooking activities are typically responsible for cooking fires. Unattended equipment, such as people leaving food in the oven or on the stove and forgetting about it, accounted for 30% of cooking fires. The other big factor is having things too close to the heat source.

A recipe for safe cooking includes:

- Always attend your cooking.
- Having nothing that can burn within three-feet of the stove or oven (paper, bills, calendars, food, potholders, etc.)
- Use cooking aids to limit grease splatter, grease screens or pan lids.
- Keep a lid to the pan you are using nearby when cooking. Cover the pan if a fire occurs. If the fire/grease spills outside the pan, use an ABC extinguisher. Have a clear exit. *Do not put water on the fire!*
- Always wear short, tight-fitting sleeves when cooking.
- Turn pot handles inward to avoid spills. Always use a potholder when reaching for handles.
- Keep children away from cooking areas by enforcing a “kid-free zone” of three feet around the stove. Keep pets from underfoot so you do not trip while cooking.

Also, keep pets off cooking surfaces and nearby countertops to prevent them from knocking things onto the burner.

- Clean cooking surfaces regularly to prevent grease buildup, including the vent cover to the fan.
- Check the kitchen before you go to bed or leave the house. Make sure all other appliances are turned off.
- If there is a microwave fire, keep the door closed and unplug the microwave. Make sure to teach children who cook, microwave safety.