

# Food Safety after a Fire

## Introduction

Fires are serious threats to life and property due to the smoke, extreme heat, and chemicals they produce. In addition, a fire may directly or indirectly affect foods in ways that could endanger your health. The following food safety and clean up tips will help protect you and the public if your food establishment is damaged by fire.

### What do you do first?

- Close the food establishment (health department approval must be given before re-opening).
- Notify the regulatory authority who will determine what foods, dry goods etc. may be salvaged.

### Are food and beverages safe after being in a fire or after the extinguishing system has discharged?

- Heat can cause jars and cans to split and crack allowing contaminants to enter.
- Even if cans and jars appear undamaged, heat can cause the food to spoil.
- Smoke and chemicals from the fire and extinguishing system can penetrate Cryovac packaging, plastic wraps of all kinds, and get under bottle caps or screw tops.
- Firefighting chemicals can taint food and beverages, and packaged products.

### What should you do with food and beverages that were in or near a fire?

- All foods and beverages stored in a permeable packaging such as cardboard, foil, paper, screw top jars or bottles, or plastic wrap should be thrown away. All unwrapped fruits and vegetables should also be thrown away.

- Foods that were stored outside the refrigerator and which were exposed to smoke and fumes must be discarded.
- Foods in refrigerators or freezers may also be tainted by fumes since refrigerator seals are not airtight. Throw away foods from the refrigerator or freezer if they have signs of smoke damage, or have off odors or tastes.
- Ice, in both serving bins and machines, must be discarded.
- Throw away foods that were touched by firefighting chemicals. These chemicals are very poisonous and cannot be safely washed off foods. If you are not sure if the food was touched by firefighting chemicals, throw it away.
- Throw away disposable single-service utensils (plastic plates, cups etc.) that were exposed to smoke and chemicals.
- Establishments serving alcohol should contact the Alcohol & Gambling Enforcement Division for guidance on disposal of liquor.
- Never taste food to determine its safety.
- Please remember that food unfit for human consumption is also unfit for pets.
- **When in doubt, throw it out.**

### Cleaning and Sanitizing

Even though a surface may look clean, chemicals from extinguishers and fine particles may be on surfaces of equipment and utensils. Cleaning and sanitizing is an important step prior to reopening.

- A professional cleaning service or restoration company may be the way to go. Check with your insurance agent for recommendations. Be sure they are familiar with food service operations.
- Utensils and other items may be cleaned and sanitized in a three-compartment sink or dishwasher.



Environmental Health Services Section  
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- Items such as tables, outsides of equipment, and shelving, should first be washed with detergent, rinsed with clear water, and then sanitized.
- Check with manufacturer on cleaning and servicing of equipment. Some pieces of equipment, such as pop machines or coolers, may have special cleaning requirements after a fire.
- Depending on the extent of the fire, ice machines and other types of equipment may need to be emptied and thoroughly cleaned per the manufacturer’s recommendations.
- Check with the health department throughout the clean-up process and prior to re-opening. They can provide guidance on what and how to clean and sanitize.

**What if the fire causes a power outage?**

Special considerations are necessary to ensure the safety of food in refrigerators and freezers.

- When the power goes out, keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible.
- Check for signs of power outage such as liquid or refrozen meat juices, soft or melted ice cream.
- If you have returned from being evacuated and are not sure if the power was shut off and then turned back on, check with your utility company.
- Minimize traffic in and out of walk-in coolers. Contaminates can be brought into walk-ins on clothing and shoes.
- Discard any food that has an unusual color, odor, or texture.
- Discard any meat, poultry, seafood, milk, or eggs that have been in the temperature danger zone (above 41°F) for more than two hours.
- Remember to check with the health department as to which foods can be safely kept.

When to Save and When to Throw It Out – Refrigerator	
FOOD & BEVERAGES	Held above 41 °F for over 2 hours
MEAT, POULTRY, SEAFOOD , DAIRY PRODUCT, BABY FORMULA, PIES/PASTRY (cream), EGGS/EGG PRODUCTS, CASSEROLES, SOUPS, STEWS, FRUITS/VEG (fresh cut & cooked), Vegetable juice (opened), SAUCES & creamy dressings, PASTA (fresh/cooked), DOUGHS, CHEESE (soft), Gravy, stuffing, broth	Discard
BAKED GOODS, PASTA, GRAINS, Pies (fruit), Peanut butter, Jelly, relish, taco sauce, mustard, catsup, olives, pickles, Worcestershire, soy, barbecue, Opened vinegar-based dressings, Fruit juices, Canned fruits – opened, CHEESE (hard)	Safe

The above table can be used as a guideline. **Please consult your local health department for specifics.**

For further information, contact the following MDH District Office:

- Bemidji           ♦       (218) 308-2100
- Duluth           ♦       (218) 723-4642
- Fergus Falls   ♦       (218) 332-5150
- Mankato       ♦       (507) 344-2700
- Metro           ♦       (651) 201-4500
- Rochester      ♦       (507) 206-2700
- St. Cloud       ♦       (320) 223-7300

Minnesota Department of Agriculture:  
♦       (651) 201-2538

Alcohol & Gambling Enforcement Div:  
♦       (651) 201-7500

To request this document in another format, call 651-201-4500, TTY 651-201-5797.