

Consumer Tips for Food Safety After Fires

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH CONSUMER FACT SHEET

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 tips will help protect you and your family if your home is damaged by fire.

Is food safe after being in a fire?

Foods may appear fine after being near a fire but could be compromised in the following ways:

- The heat can cause jars and cans to split and crack allowing germs to enter.
- Even if cans and jars are undamaged, heat can cause the food to spoil.
- Smoke and chemicals from the fire can poison foods.
- Firefighting chemicals can taint foods.

What should you do with food that was in or near a fire?

- All foods stored in permeable packaging such as cardboard and plastic wrap should be thrown away.
- Foods such as fruits and vegetables 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 that have off flavors/odors when prepared.
- 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 food utensils (plastic plates, cups, etc.) that were exposed to smoke.

What if the fire causes the power to go off?

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

- When the power goes out, keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed and, open as little as possible. Refrigerated items should be safe as long as the power is off no more than about four hours.
- Discard foods that do not need to be cooked before eating if they were touched by thawed meat juices.
- Discard perishable foods (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and leftovers) that have been above 41° F. for two or more hours.
- Frozen foods that still contain ice, or that are in a freezer where the temperature is maintained at or below 41° F. can be safely refrozen or cooked within two days.
- Discard any food that has an unusual odor, color or texture. However, be aware that foods might look, smell, and taste fine despite being heavily contaminated. Never taste food to determine its safety.
- Check with your utility company if you return home after a fire and are unsure if or for how long the power was off.
- Check for signs of power outage such as liquid or refrozen meat juices, soft or melted and refrozen ice cream, or unusual odors. Remember that foods unfit for humans are also unfit for pets. ***If in doubt, throw it out!***

The information in this document is intended as guidance for private consumers. Commercial licensed food establishments should consult the relevant regulations and/or their regulatory authority for appropriate guidance.