

Cooking Safety Tips

By Basil Housewright

Cooking at home is something that many of us do on a daily basis. Most home fires occur while someone is cooking in the kitchen. Awareness about potential fire hazards and taking simple precautions in the kitchen can help prevent home fires from occurring. Each year, more than 2,500 people perish and 12,600 are injured in home fires in the United States, with direct property loss due to home fires estimated at \$7.3 billion annually, according to United States Department of Homeland Security (<https://www.ready.gov/home-fires>). To avoid home fires that could lead to costly homeowners insurance claims or injuries to you or loved ones, check out these basic tips for avoiding cooking fires in your home:

Remain in the kitchen while cooking. Stay in the kitchen when you are cooking, and keep a close eye on any food that you are frying, boiling, or grilling. If you leave the kitchen for even a short period of time, turn off the stove.

Regularly check on food you have simmering or slow cooking. Be sure to set a timer when you have dishes in the oven so you don't forget to remove them when ready.

Keep pets out of the kitchen while cooking. It is easy to trip over them if you don't realize they are there. This especially goes for pets that are able to jump onto the counter and potentially knock a pan off the stove, which could lead to serious burns or even start a fire.

Don't mix drinking and cooking. It is easy to get careless when you've been celebrating a little too much, or tired from preparing a large meal for the holidays. Don't use the stove top or oven to cook if you are sleepy, have been drinking alcohol, or have taken medicine that makes you drowsy.

It is too easy to forget or fall asleep while you have something cooking. Keep small appliances unplugged when not in use to avoid the danger of accidentally turning them on.

Keep children away from the stove when cooking. Teaching your children to cook and letting them observe you while cooking can be a fun learning experience, however, it is important to keep safety in mind when doing so. Turn pot handles towards the back of the stove and use the back burners so children cannot pull a pan down. Your best bet is to designate a "child free zone" of at least 3 feet around the stove. Mark the area with tape and teach your little one to stay away from that area while something is cooking.

Keep your cooking area clean. To avoid items from catching fire, it is important to keep flammable items away from the cooking area. Food packaging, towels, Ziploc bags, and recipe cards are items to be mindful of. Always wear oven mitts when cooking or handling hot dishes, but be sure to keep them away from the stove when not in use.

Pay attention to what you are wearing while cooking. Items such as scarves, loose sweaters, and long sleeves can catch fire while reaching across pans or burners. Also be sure to tie back long hair.

Test your smoke alarm once a month. Make sure your smoke alarm is installed and working. You should test your smoke alarm on a monthly basis. If your alarm doesn't sound when tested, it's time to replace the battery or the entire unit. A frequent chirping sound from a smoke detector means the battery has reached its useful life, is about dead and needs replacement. The risk of dying in a home fire is cut in half in homes with working smoke alarms.

If you haven't gotten around to hanging your smoke detector, make sure you at least have the batteries installed and keep the smoke detector in the kitchen. That way, it can still sound, even when not mounted on the ceiling. Also keep a fire extinguisher handy in the kitchen and know how to properly use it, should it be necessary.

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