

Fires and Food Safety

Can any food items be salvageable after a fire?

According to the USDA Food Safety & Inspection Service's April 16, 2010 report, some 2 million American homes are in flames yearly. When we think of the aftermath of a home fire, we think of the people left to salvage not only their belongings, but their lives.

What about salvaging food after a fire? Generally, saving food that has been in a fire is not a good idea, even if it is canned and sealed. **Food exposed to fire can be compromised by three factors: the heat of the fire, smoke fumes, and chemicals used to fight fire.**

Heat from the Fire

Food in cans or jars may appear to be okay, but if they've been close to the heat of a fire, they may no longer be safe. Why? Heat from a fire can activate food spoilage bacteria, and, if the heat is extreme, the cans or jars themselves can split or rupture, also making the food unsafe.

Fumes from a Fire

Toxic fumes released from the burning materials can sometimes be more dangerous than the fire itself. Those fumes can kill, and they can also contaminate food. Any type of food that is stored in packaging that can be penetrated – cardboard, plastic wrap, etc. – should be thrown out. Toxic fumes can penetrate 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.

What about the food that is stored in the refrigerator or freezer? They, too, can also be contaminated by fumes. The refrigerator/freezer seal is not airtight and fumes can get inside.

Chemicals in Fires

Chemicals that are used to fight fires contain toxic materials and can contaminate food **and** cookware! These chemicals cannot be washed off the food. Foods that are exposed to chemicals should be thrown away. This includes food that is stored at room temperature, such as fruits and vegetables, as well as foods stored in permeable containers like cardboard and screw-topped jars and bottles. To decontaminate cookware, first wash them in a strong detergent solution. Then soak in a bleach solution (1 teaspoon bleach per quart of water) for 15 minutes. Wash, rinse, and air dry.

More guidelines for handling specific food item

Bottled soft drinks:

Unless protected by a plastic outer wrap or in bottles with sealed screw-on lids, soft drinks in glass bottles are almost impossible to salvage. Soft drinks in plastic bottles are almost always deemed unsalvageable due to heat and smoke.

Canned soft drinks:

They may be salvaged if the contents have not been subjected to excessive heat or fire. The cans must be cleaned and sanitized, if necessary.

Dairy products:

As a rule, dairy products should be discarded with no attempt to salvage, due to vulnerable packaging and temperature requirements.

Sugars, candies, flour, cereal products, bakery products, dried beans, rice and other grains:

No attempt to salvage such products should be made due to vulnerable packaging.

Fish and meats – fresh or frozen:

In almost all instances, these products should be discarded.

Refrigerated and frozen food:

Usually no salvage should be attempted unless frozen foods are stored in a completely enclosed walk-in or cabinet freezer and electrical service has not been interrupted for extended periods. Prompt removal of such foods to a suitable storage unit is necessary to save the product.

Produce – fresh or dried:

Usually, all products are not salvageable and should be discarded.

For more information, contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline or one of these other government sites:

CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- Call 1-800-CDC-INFO or 1-800-232-4636 - www.cdc.gov

FDA: Food and Drug Administration

- For information on safe food handling for foods other than meat, poultry, or egg products, call FDA's toll-free information line at 1-888-SAFEFOOD or 1-888-723-3366. www.cfsan.fda.gov
- FDA emergency number, staffed 24 hours a day, (301) 443-1240.

Other

- Environmental Protection Agency – EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline: 1-800-426-4791 www.epa.gov
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): Food and Water in an Emergency - www.fema.gov

General Disaster Assistance Site: www.foodsafety.gov

Sources:

USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service

www.foodsafety.gov