

Food Safety After a Fire

Fire damage can jeopardize the safety of food. Identifying and discarding potentially unsafe food will help to reduce the risk of food-borne illness.

How does a fire make food unsafe?

Food exposed to fire can be contaminated by toxic chemicals, and can be spoiled or made more prone to spoilage by bacteria. Smoke and fumes, heat from the fire and chemicals used to fight the fire can make food or drink unsafe to consume.

What do I do with food that may be unsafe because of a fire?

Discard all food that may have been exposed to fumes, smoke, heat and/or chemicals used to fight fire. If you are in doubt about the safety of any food, throw it out rather than risk illness or disease.

Food that has been contaminated or spoiled may not look different. You cannot usually see chemicals or pathogens on food. The following food safety tips can help you determine which foods to throw out and which to save.

Throw out:

- **Food stored in permeable packaging** such as cardboard, plastic wrap, screw-topped jars, bottles, etc. This includes home-canned products and dry foods such as sugar, candies, flour, cereal products, bakery products, dried beans and rice.
- **Food stored at room temperature in cabinets and on shelves** in areas where the food could have been contaminated. This includes potatoes and other fresh fruit and vegetables, and dried fruit.
- **Food stored in refrigerators or freezers that have become contaminated** (the refrigerator seals may not be airtight and fumes can get inside). This includes: dairy products, fresh or frozen fish and meats. If food from your refrigerator has an off-flavour or odour when it is prepared, discard it. Always err on the side of caution.
- **Food packaged in cans or jars that have been exposed to heat.** Discard cans and jars that have split or ruptured, or have other visible signs of damage.

Only food in commercially sealed, undamaged, unopened, water proof airtight metal cans may be considered safe once the containers are cleaned and sanitized according to the instructions in the cleaning section below.

How do I clean after a fire?

Discard and remove from the building all damaged equipment, utensils, linens and single-service items, such as paper or plastic plates, cups or utensils.

Clean and sanitize all areas and non-permeable equipment affected by fire. This includes: utensils/ silverware, cookware, dishware, food contact surfaces, food preparation equipment, floors, floor sinks, floor drains, and furniture.

Use the following cleaning and sanitizing method:

- Thoroughly wash with soap and water
- Rinse with clean water
- Sanitize by immersing in:
 - a mild bleach solution made with 5 ml (1 tsp) bleach per 750 ml (3 cups) water; or
 - hot water of 77°C (170°F) or hotter
- Air dry.

Closed, undamaged cans containing food can be sanitized by placing them in water and allowing the water to boil for at least two minutes. Alternatively, you can immerse them for two minutes in a mild bleach solution made with 5 ml (1 tsp) bleach per 750 ml (3 cups) of water. Remove labels prior to washing and sanitizing. Cans that have been cleaned and sanitized should be used as soon as possible as they may rust.

If there was a fire at your food premises, please notify Huron Perth Public Health. A fire damaged food premises cannot reopen until permitted by a public health inspector.

Reminder

When there is any doubt about the safety of a food product; it should be thrown out as a precaution.

Questions?

Call 1-888-221-2133 ext 3670.

December 2025

Adapted with permission of Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health