

What About Food That Has Been In A Fire?

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After a fire people try to save what they can. Food may look okay and it is tempting to save it. However, saving food that's been in a fire is not a good idea. Three factors can affect the safety of food that has been exposed to fire -- the heat of the fire, smoke fumes, and chemicals used to put out the fire.

Heat Can Cause Food to Spoil

If commercial- or home- canned foods were close to the heat of a fire, they may not be safe to eat. Certain bacteria that cause food to spoil are activated *only* at high temperatures. Under normal circumstances these bacteria do not affect cans or jars of food. However, the extreme heat of the fire may cause the bacteria to grow and contaminate the contents. Intense heat may also cause the cans or jars to break and make the food unsafe to eat.

Home-canned foods pose an additional risk. The high temperatures of a fire can cause the lids of home-canned foods to come unsealed and let bacteria get into the food. When the air temperature drops, the jar lids may "seal" again making them appear unaffected. The jars look okay, but the food is unsafe to eat.

Toxic Fumes and Chemicals Can Contaminate Food

Chemicals used to fight fires contain toxic materials that cannot be washed off of food. All foods that have been exposed to chemicals should be thrown away. Burning materials release toxic fumes that can contaminate food, tableware, and cookware. However, canned goods and cookware that have been exposed to toxic fumes or chemicals can be decontaminated.

Following These Guidelines Can Insure Food Safety

Packaged food. Throw away food stored in permeable containers such as cardboard, plastic wrap, and screw-topped jars because they may have been damaged by the heat. Toxic fumes and chemicals can also get into the packaging and contaminate food.

Canned foods. Discard home canned goods. They may look okay, but it is not possible to determine if heat broke the seal and spoilage occurred. Commercially canned foods can be decontaminated. However, get rid of any commercially canned food that smells or looks spoiled when you open it, since it may be heat damaged.

Refrigerated or frozen food. Check the refrigerator and freezer for off odors. Because door seals on these appliances are not airtight, fumes can contaminate the foods inside. Get rid of foods that have off odors or flavors.

Food stored at room temperature. Dispose of raw foods that were stored outside the refrigerator, such as potatoes, onions, or fruit. Fumes or chemicals could have contaminated them.

Decontaminate canned goods and 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.

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