

Fire on the stove

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By Gary Vincent

Kitchen fires are one of the leading causes of home fires in America. Unattended food cooking on the stove is the primary source of kitchen fires.

All too often, the person cooking on the stove is distracted and leaves the area with no one watching the food as it heats.

Once ignited, the fire spreads rapidly to the area above the stove, and then spreads to the rest of the kitchen.

If someone is present when the fire first ignites, it is often controllable with simple actions. If no one is present in the early stage of the fire, the fire grows in a rapid predictable manner, quickly grows out of control, and is not extinguishable or controllable by the homeowner.

So, what actions can you take to control food on the stove that has ignited?

First, do not panic. Alert other occupants in the home by yelling that there is a “Fire in the Kitchen!”

This will alert them to the danger in the house, provides you help to control the fire, and you can use them to get other occupants out of the home. In addition, once safely outside, they can call the fire department (911) for help.

Secondly, you must determine what type of container is burning. If it is a pot or a pan with sides, smother the fire by placing a lid on top of the pot. A heavy metal lid is best.

This will reduce or eliminate the oxygen to the fire. Slide the lid onto the pot from the side. Do not lower the lid from directly above the fire, as you may burn your fingers, hand, or arm!

In the absence of a lid, a heavy cookie sheet or other flat metal pan may be useful. Once in place, do not remove the lid or cookie sheet, as this will allow oxygen to re-enter the pot or pan and reignite the food (fuel) instantly.

Just the simple act of placing the lid or cookie sheet on the burning pot of food will slow the growth of the fire.

The next course of action should be to obtain a portable fire extinguisher. This is not the time to try to read the instructions.

Get familiar with your portable fire extinguisher before you need it! You should know how to:

Pull the pin.

Aim at the base of the fire.

Squeeze the trigger.

Sweep the extinguisher back and forth at the fire.

The acronym is PASS, pull, aim, squeeze, sweep.

One of the biggest training issues with portable extinguishers is the operating time and distance of the extinguisher.

Most portable extinguishers operate at a distance of about 6 feet for 8-15 seconds. There is no time or extinguishing agent to waste.

If the fire is burning in the pot and there is no lid present, aim the extinguisher just above the rim of the pot (about 1-2") and let the agent drop down onto the fire.

Do not aim directly down into the fire, as the discharge force of the extinguisher will throw the burning material out of the pot all over the area like a fountain, often onto the person operating the portable extinguisher.

Portable extinguishers are labeled into four classes based upon the type of fire it is to be used on- Class A, Class B, Class C, and Class D. Class A fires are wood, paper, and cloth. Class B fires are flammable or combustible liquids. Class C fires are energized electrical fires, and Class D fires are flammable metal fires. Your portable extinguisher must be matched to the type of fire you are fighting. A Class A portable extinguisher is not effective on a Class B fire, or vice versa.

I recommend the one and only type of portable fire extinguisher labeled as a multi-use Class A-Class B-Class C that is manufactured for home use. They are readily available at local stores and are marked for use on Class A, Class, B, and Class C fires, which are by far the most common types. This one type of portable fire extinguisher is the only one manufactured for three of the four classes of fire. Most portable fire extinguishers are for use on one or two classes of fire only.

What about throwing water on to the fire on top of the stove? The first and most important question is what type of food is on fire? If it is a flammable liquid, such as cooking oil, then do not throw water on the oil fire! The water will react violently with the burning oil and will flare instantly to a very large fire, often seriously burning the person who applied the water!

If the burning food is a solid, such as meat or vegetables, then the application of water from a distance may be effective but is just as likely to spread the fire as extinguish it. It is better to cover the fire with the heavy metal lid than to try to extinguish it with a small container of water.

Water is effective in controlling small fires in the kitchen waste basket, but not very effective for food fires on the stove due to the volume of grease and oils in many foods.

So, you are standing at the stove and a small fire in a pot of food breaks out.

Once you have alerted the other occupants of the home to the fire danger, if you are not able to smother the fire or control the fire quickly, you must leave the area and go outside to safety immediately.

Fires grow at an incredible speed. Do not wait too long and become incapacitated or trapped by the fire!

The lives of you and your family members depend on getting outside to safety before the fire makes escape impossible!

Vincent is the fire chief of the Magnolia Volunteer Fire Department. For more information visit:

www.magnoliafire.org or visit our new Central Station 181 at 18215 Buddy Riley Blvd - Magnolia, Texas 77354