

Put yourself in this picture:

It's a half hour before dinner...

and you're rushing around to get the meal ready in time. You've got rolls in the toaster oven and vegetables in the microwave. Both appliances and a number of others are plugged into octopuses two deep in a nearby electrical outlet.

Meanwhile, the roast is browning in the oven and a pot of water is boiling on the stove. Just then—always at the wrong time—the doorbell rings. You hurry off, leaving your inquisitive two-year-old toddler alone in the kitchen.

What's wrong with this picture? Plenty. That's why more fires start in the kitchen than anywhere else in the house. And every year, 5,000 Americans die in home fires and tens of thousands more suffer pain and disfigurement from burns and smoke inhalation.

What can you do to reduce your chances of being one of the victims? Plenty, starting with the common-sense steps that follow.

FIRE SAFETY IN THE KITCHEN




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Gather some tools

Begin by gathering a few fire safety essentials.

Your first priority should be smoke detectors. Buy one or more for each floor and install them in your home. Working smoke detectors double your chances of surviving a fire. Several manufacturers even make detectors specially suited for kitchen areas.

Fire extinguishers are just as important. But don't pick up just any extinguisher. Get one that's "listed" or "labeled" by an independent testing laboratory. Your best bet is to buy an "ABC" extinguisher. That means the extinguisher is filled with a multipurpose dry chemical that will smother most fires in the kitchen. Just make sure your extinguisher is within easy reach (not in a cabinet above the stove!) and is fully charged. Baking soda is also good for putting out grease fires.

Finally, make sure the telephone number of your local fire department is posted near (or preferably on) your phone. That way you won't waste precious time during an emergency searching for the number. Many communities provide free stickers with police and fire emergency numbers. Get some and stick them on every phone in your house (especially the ones in your basement and garage).



Practice stove safety

Make sure someone is always in the kitchen whenever the stove is on. Why? A child or pet could knock something off or onto the stove and

get burned or start a fire. In addition, the heat from the stove or pot or pan on a burner could ignite a blaze.

Speaking of the stove, you can make your kitchen safer by turning the pots so the handles don't stick out over the edge. That way you're less likely to knock them off the stove and your young children will be less able to reach up and grab one.

When cooking, remember that tight-fitting sleeves are safer than loose sleeves that could touch a burner and catch fire. And, never put anything on or near the stove that is flammable, including bags of groceries.



Get a grip on grease

One way to prevent kitchen fires is to keep your stove clean. Accumulations of dirt and grease could help the stove catch fire.

If grease in a pan catches fire, carefully slide a lid over the pan to smother the flames, then turn off the burner. If that doesn't put out the blaze, use a multipurpose dry chemical fire extinguisher to smother the flames. Don't use water on a grease fire. Water will cause the grease to scatter the flames to adjacent areas.

If an extinguisher doesn't do the job or the blaze gets too big, get out of your home as quickly as possible and then call the fire department.



Check your electric

Look at the electrical cords on the toaster, microwave and other electrical appliances. If the cords are cracked or worn out, they should be replaced. And make sure you don't have three or four appliances plugged into the same outlet.

Are all your kitchen appliances in working order? If not, don't use them until they're professionally repaired.

At the same time, have your electrical wiring checked by a competent electrician periodically to make sure it's okay.



Teach your kids

Teach your children what "hot" means at an early age. Tell your children often that stoves, pans, ovens, fireplaces and, especially, tap water are hot. Under your guidance, you may want to have your child touch a slightly hot object—such as a metal pot or pan that's been run under hot tap water—so he or she better understands the word hot and the sensations associated with it.

Repeat the basic rules of fire safety to your children over and over and over again. Teach them to: 1) Stay away from the stove; 2) Not play with matches; 3) Keep back from open fires; and 4) Not fool with electricity.

You can do a lot to prevent a fire from starting in your kitchen, but if a fire still strikes your home, get out of your house as quickly as you can and call the fire department from a neighbor's home. Don't go back inside a burning building, no matter what. If you think someone might be trapped inside tell the fire fighters as soon as they arrive.