



4905 5th Ave. Fort Rucker, AL 36362-5363
Comm. (334) 255-3770 • Fax (334) 255-2266
<https://safety.army.mil>

Out of the fire

Keep safety top priority when eating under the stars this summer

By Sam Reynolds
U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center

Summer outdoor dining is as popular as ever. From fun-filled family picnics to romantic dinners for two, many fond summer memories find roots in afternoons and evenings around a picnic table or grill.

To make this summer's outdoor dining memories happy ones and not ones full of pain or trips to the emergency room, it is important to plan and use common sense before the first piece of charcoal is lit or the first hamburger hits the grill.

Good grilling

With more Americans lighting their grills than ever before, it is important to remember that a fun barbecue is a safe barbecue. Statistics released by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) indicate that gas and charcoal grills caused an average of 3,400 structure fires and 4,900 outdoor fires in or on home properties in 2005. These fires resulted in a combined direct property loss of \$137 million.

Anytime you work with fire, there's a chance of getting burned. Common sense and planning will help prevent injuries and tips, like those listed below, will help keep everyone safe this summer.

- **Read the owner's manual.**
Always read the owner's manual before using your grill and follow specific usage, assembly and safety procedures. Contact the grill manufacturer if you have specific questions. Be sure to locate your model number and the manufacturer's consumer inquiry phone number and write them on the front page of your manual.
- **Grills are for outside only.**
Barbecue grills are designed for outdoor use only. Never barbecue in your trailer, tent, house, garage, or any enclosed area because carbon monoxide may accumulate and kill you.
- **Use in well-ventilated areas.**
Set up your grill in an open area that is away from buildings, overhead combustible surfaces, dry leaves, or brush. Be sure to avoid high traffic areas and always barbecue in a well-ventilated area. Be aware of wind-blown sparks.
- **Keep grill stable.**
When using a barbecue grill, be sure that all parts of the unit are firmly in place and that the grill is stable and can't be tipped over.
- **Follow electric codes.**
If electrically-operated accessories like rotisseries are used, be sure they are properly grounded in accordance with local codes. Electrical cords should be placed away from walkways or anywhere people can trip over them.
- **Use long-handled utensils.**
Use barbecue utensils with long handles (forks, tongs, etc.) to avoid burns and splatters.

- **Wear safe clothing.**
Wear clothing that does not have hanging shirt tails, frills or apron strings that can catch fire, and use flame-retardant mitts when adjusting hot vents.
- **Keep fire under control.**
To put out flare-ups, either raise the grid that the food is on, spread the coals out evenly, or adjust the controls to lower the temperature. If you must douse the flames with a light spray of water, first remove the food from the grill.
- **Be ready to extinguish flames.**
Use baking soda to control a grease fire and have a fire extinguisher ready. A bucket of sand or a garden hose should be near if you don't have a commercial extinguisher.
- **Consider placing a grill pad or splatter mat beneath your grill.**
These naturally heat resistant pads are usually made of lightweight composite cement or plastic and will protect your deck or patio from any grease that misses the drip pan.
- **Never leave a grill unattended once lit.**
- **Stay away from hot grill.**
Don't allow anyone to conduct activity near the grill when in use or immediately following its use. The grill body remains hot up to an hour after being used.
- **Don't move a hot grill.**
Never attempt to move a hot grill. It's easy to stumble or drop it and serious burns could result.

Food Safety

Summertime is the season for cookouts, picnics and grilling outside. When you're cooking outdoors, it's more important than ever to keep your food preparation area clean and sanitary, especially when it's hot outside. Below is a list of tips to help avoid food poisoning at your summer cookouts.

Avoid cross-contamination.

Cross-contamination occurs when bacteria from one food item are transferred to another food item, often by way of unwashed cutting boards or countertops, as well as knives and other kitchen tools, or even unwashed hands. For example, cross contamination could occur if a cook were to cut raw chicken on a cutting board and then later slice fresh tomatoes on the same board without washing it first.

Clean everything.

Bacteria can spread throughout the kitchen and get onto hands, cutting boards, knives, dish cloths, sponges and counter tops. Clean frequently and thoroughly.

- Always wash your hands with soap before preparing or serving food and after handling raw meat, poultry and seafood; using the washroom or changing diapers; sneezing/coughing; handling garbage; or touching pets.
- Wash cutting boards, knives, utensils and counter tops with hot soapy water after preparing each food item and before going to the next one.
- Add an extra cleaning step with surfaces. Wipe them using 1/2 teaspoon of household bleach in one liter of water.
- Dish cloths can be an ideal environment for bacteria to grow and multiply. Change dish cloths often and machine wash them in hot water. Consider using paper towels to clean up kitchen surfaces.

Separate raw from cooked.

Bacteria can easily spread from raw foods to cooked foods. This is called cross-contamination. When preparing raw meat, poultry and seafood make sure you keep these foods and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods.

- Keep raw meat, poultry and seafood away from other food in your grocery cart and bags. Use the clear plastic bags provided at the meat counter.
- Store raw meat, poultry and seafood on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator on a plate so juices don't drip onto other foods.
- Use one cutting board for raw meat, poultry or seafood and another for foods that are ready-to-eat, such as salads, fruit, etc.

- Always wash cutting boards, knives and other utensils with hot soapy water after they come in contact with raw meat, poultry or seafood.
- Never place cooked food on a plate that held uncooked meat, poultry or seafood.

Cook thoroughly.

Foods are properly cooked when they are heated for a long enough time and at a high enough temperature to kill the harmful bacteria that cause food borne illness.

- Use a meat thermometer to measure the internal temperature of cooked meat and poultry to make sure that the meat is cooked all the way through. See cooking temperature chart.
- If you don't use a meat thermometer, cook until juices run clear (no blood).
- Cook ground meat, such as hamburger, thoroughly. Bacteria can spread during the grinding process and may cause serious illness unless destroyed by cooking. Do not eat ground beef that is pink inside. If it's grey, it's safe.

Keep it cold.

Cold temperatures of 4°C/40°F or below slow down the growth of micro-organisms. Use a refrigerator thermometer to check that your refrigerator temperature is 4°C/40°F or below and your freezer temperature is -18°C/0°F. Refrigerator thermometers are available in hardware stores. Keeping food cold is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of food borne illness.

- Do not over-stuff the refrigerator. Cold air must be able to circulate to keep food safe.
- Never defrost food at room temperature. Thaw food in the refrigerator. For a quick thaw, place the food item in an airtight package and put in cold water. Another option is to thaw in the microwave if cooking immediately.
- Always marinate foods in the refrigerator.
- Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared foods and leftovers within two hours of purchase or use.
- Separate large amounts of leftovers into small, shallow containers for quicker cooling in the refrigerator.

And lastly, if you are consuming alcoholic beverages, be sure to drink them away from the flames and remember drinking impairs your judgment and increases your risk of injury.

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