

Safety Tips

Avoid Microwave Mishaps



Microwave ovens are great at quickly cooking and reheating food. They are convenient and simple to use, but their handiness should not lull anyone into taking safety for granted when using them. Scalds are the leading cause of injury from microwaves, but fires are another real hazard. Not following basic safety guidelines can change an easy meal into a dangerous one. You can prevent serious burns and potential fires by following these safety tips from the FDA (Food and Drug Administration).

1. **Follow the manufacturer's instructions for use.** Directions in the user manual provide recommended operating procedures and safety precautions. Any misuse of the oven may result in personal injury. For instance, you should not turn on some microwave ovens when they are empty. In addition, you should not heat water or liquids longer than the manufacturer's instructions and recommendations.
2. **Use microwave-safe containers.** Use cookware specially manufactured for use in the microwave oven. Generally, you should not use metal pans or aluminum foil because microwaves reflect off them, causing food to cook unevenly and possibly damaging the oven. And you should not use some plastic containers because heated food can cause them to melt. The FDA recommends using glass, ceramic, and plastic containers labeled for microwave oven use.
3. **Avoid super-heated water.** "Super-heated" means water is heated beyond its boiling temperature, without signs of boiling. If you use a microwave oven to heat water in a clean cup beyond the boiling temperature, a slight disturbance or movement may cause the water to violently explode out of the cup. There have been reports of serious skin burns or scalding injuries around people's hands and faces as a result of this phenomenon.

Adding ingredients such as instant coffee or sugar to water *before* heating greatly reduces the risk of hot-water eruption. Also remember to follow the manufacturer's heating instructions.

4. **Check for leakage.** There should be little cause for concern about excess microwave radiation leaking from these ovens unless the door hinges, latch, or seals are damaged. The FDA recommends looking at your oven carefully to see if any of these issues exist. The agency also recommends that you do not use an oven if the door doesn't close firmly or is bent, warped, or otherwise damaged.
5. **Don't use ovens that seem to operate when the door is open.** The FDA monitors these appliances for radiation safety issues and has received increasing reports about microwave ovens that appear to stay on—and operate—when the door is open. The FDA recommends that you immediately stop using a microwave oven if this happens.

More Microwave Oven Safety Tips

- ◆ Plug the unit directly into the wall outlet. **DO NOT** use an extension cord or surge protector.
- ◆ Be sure that your microwave is installed properly and that it is installed at a safe height for all users.
- ◆ Repair or replace any microwave that is not in good working condition. Repairs should only be done by a qualified service person.
- ◆ Do not disable, by-pass or tamper with any safety locks or fuses. Do not insert an object through an opening or around the door seal.
- ◆ Keep it clean. Food particles and grease residue can ignite and cause a fire. Check to see that the door seal and inside surfaces of the door and oven cavity are clean after each use. Clean the door and oven cavity with water and mild detergent. Do not use abrasives such as scouring pads.
- ◆ Never put metal, like aluminum foil, metal edged or foil trim bowls or objects, metal plates or cups, metal utensils, metal staples on tea bags, or metal twist ties in the in the microwave. The metal can spark or arc, damage the unit, and lead to a fire or burn hazard. This tip also applies to plastic bags with a reflective silvery surface. The metalized film inside of these bags is composed of a very thin coating of aluminum.

- ◆ Never heat sealed containers. Leave an opening for steam release. Puncture cooking pouches and foods that have tight skins to release steam as they cook.
- ◆ Open food slowly and away from your face. Steam can cause burns.
- ◆ Since food is heated unevenly in the microwave, you need to stir the food before testing the temperature.
- ◆ Read the cooking instructions on the package.
- ◆ Never use a brown paper bag for popping popcorn. It can catch fire.
- ◆ Never leave an operating microwave unattended.
- ◆ Never use a microwave oven for storage. Using a microwave oven for storage is not an appropriate preventative for pests, such as mice and roaches. The best preventative for pests in schools and offices is to remove the food source. If food must be eaten and stored on-site, you are responsible for cleaning up thoroughly after eating and for storing food properly. Food stored in classrooms and offices should be kept in heavy-duty plastic or glass containers with tight fitting lids.
- ◆ Microwave ovens can overload electrical circuits in a building creating a fire hazard. Keep the number of microwave ovens to a minimum. Microwaves are not necessary in individual offices. They should be limited to kitchens, break rooms, staff lounges and lunch rooms. When there are student-related needs in classrooms, microwaves are allowed; but they should not be used for personal cooking and reheating.

A Few Words About Popcorn...

Popcorn is a tasty, low calorie snack which many people enjoy during the school and work day. Popping popcorn in a microwave oven makes it fresh and fast; however, leaving popcorn in the microwave even a few seconds too long can lead to it scorching, burning and creating a smoke condition. All too often, this triggers a fire alarm causing the building to have to evacuate and needlessly having the fire department send a truck to the site.

Proper Popcorn Popping Practices

- ☞ **Make sure your popcorn is fresh.** Check the expiration date on the package before you put it in the microwave oven. If the kernels are old and dry, they won't pop and will burn.
- ☞ **Read the bag.** The bag actually contains valuable instructions. It is especially important to place the proper side facing down in the microwave so that it inflates.

- ☞ **Do not rely on the popcorn setting** on the microwave oven. Many microwaves have only a preset time and no humidity sensor, which means that the microwave cannot tell when something is burning. Since the power on microwave ovens tends to vary, you will never really know what you will end up with using the preset popcorn option.
- ☞ **Time it right.** Use the timing directions on the package as a guideline, but do not walk away from the microwave. Stand nearby and listen. If there are more than two full seconds in-between pops; it is time to stop and remove the bag, no matter what amount of time the directions gave you.



IN CASE OF FIRE

- **Leave the door closed.**
- **Turn the microwave off and unplug it.**
- **If the fire does not go out, exit the area and call for emergency help.**

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For more information, call the Safety Hotline 396-2400.