

# Kitchen Fire ? – Be Sure !

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*This article was originally published in the March 1992 issue of the Canadian Association of Fire Investigators The/Le Journal.*

All too frequently we hear on the news or read in the newspaper the accounts of a residential fire, often causing severe damage and all too often the death of one or more of the occupants. We are all aware of the hazards located in the kitchen, and this area of any household is a very dangerous area. All the ingredients for a fire are present in one area, plus you add the most underestimated ingredient, people, and one begins to wonder why more kitchen fires do not occur. In this area we have heat sources (stove and/or any one of a dozen electrical appliances), fuel (cooking oils, grease, food products), and usually this is the area of the residence that most of the family congregates. As a result of the type of activity involved in the kitchen, confusion and lack of attention is also present. This is when accidents occur.

When examining a kitchen scene, we might take some of the obvious ingredients for granted if we don't remember to be specific about checking everything thoroughly. These may tend to appear basic, but how many times have they been missed in the past? If the residential fire was believed to have started in the kitchen, here are some of the questions that should be asked. You may very well be able to add to this list, and the more questions asked, the better your chances are of obtaining all the information. Is the stove a gas or electric unit? Was the service to the unit functional? Was the service free from defects? Had the service been altered or tampered with? Was the gas or electric service disconnected by the suppliers a result of non-payment or for malfunctioning or condemned appliances? If the fire was supposed to have started on or around the stove, does the burn damage support this origin? If not, why?

Upon examining the stove, close attention should be paid to the burners. Were they on? Is there evidence under the burner in the catch basin? Was more than one burner on? Relying on the information of the residents is dangerous, and their information must be confirmed by your own physical examination. A stove fire should result in the area around, and especially above, suffering deep burning and usually cupboards above will bear the brunt of the fire and suffer severe damage. But what if the damage is not consistent with the information as received from the occupant? What if you feel this is not a stove fire?

One of the most underestimated contributors to any fire is the human element. How many fires have you seen that is directly connected to an act or omission by someone present? There seems to be a direct relation to the consumption of alcohol and the making of french fries in the early morning hours after the closing of bars. The use of this type of product in relation to the hour and state of mind of the person involved is a formula for a severe fire. The unattended stove heating the oil and the sleeping person quite often finds its way into the newspaper headlines as a fatal house fire.

A thorough scene examination should also include the kitchen floor. Here is an area that can be very easily overlooked, and can hold a great deal of information. If a fire was to have originated on the stove and you discover a burn pattern on the floor, are we now dealing with an incendiary fire? People respond in different ways to traumatic situations. Often, people respond and do not recall any of their actions. The burn pattern on the floor may be the result of the actions of the occupant. Trying to remove the pot of grease from the kitchen and spilling its contents will change the whole complexion of the fire from a kitchen accident to what might appear to be an incendiary origin. However, we must keep in mind that this may have been what was intended and is, in fact, arson.

Any investigation should include the interviewing of all witnesses, and their information should always be applied to the fire scene. Don't be too quick to write off a fire in the kitchen as an accident, but in turn, don't assume that just because the scene does not fit into the classic mould, it must be arson. Get all the facts, interview all the witnesses, and confirm what you are told by what you see in the scene.

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