



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

December 2015

Off-Campus - Grease Fires...

In the past year I've responded to at least three fire incidents where the tenant used water in an attempt to extinguish a grease fire. Fortunately, in all three incidents no one was injured. And, two times the dwelling unit was protected by a residential sprinkler system that prevented the fire from spreading.



So, why water? Many of our educational materials explain how to extinguish a grease fire. And, all remind attendees to 'Never' use water. So why do they do it? Most times it's likely panic. For students living in their own for the first time, most may have never experienced a cooking fire before. Immediately, thoughts of losing possessions and getting in trouble by the landlord flash through their minds. Other times it is likely just instinct, as we can use water for most fires in the home setting.

What other options are there? Some will have a fire extinguisher. How about baking soda? Or, covering the pan with a lid and turning off the heat? All three can be good options, so let's take a brief look at each of these. No matter what you choose, always turn off the heat first (if you can safely) and call 9-1-1.



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Fire Extinguishers: Fire extinguishers may be required by local codes, provided by the landlord, or tenants (parents) brought one at the time of move in. If there is an extinguisher, is it the proper type for the type of fire? Where is the extinguisher stored? In the closet? Under the sink? In the mounting bracket that was supplied when bought new? It won't do much good to have an extinguisher if it can't be found, or if someone moved it. The best location is in the approved bracket, installed in a visible location in or near the kitchen (if only one), away from the stove AND towards the exit. This way, someone can find it when it's needed. The person using the extinguisher shouldn't need to go past the fire to get the extinguisher, as they risk getting trapped or injured. Now, the next question should be 'does anyone in the house know how to use it?' This is really important, especially with a grease fire. In fact, some will suggest not using an extinguisher for a grease fire because it can splash burning grease out of the pan and on the stove or counters. It all comes down to proper training and being comfortable in doing so. If you're not sure, consider some other options.



Baking Soda:

Doesn't everyone have a box or two of baking soda in the kitchen? Maybe in the fridge? If so, this will often times work on a grease fire. Baking soda is chemically known as sodium bicarbonate. This chemical is one of several chemicals used in fire extinguishers. So, it should work - right? You'll likely need the entire box and be careful not to too close to the open flame. Don't forget to turn off the heat.



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The fire may reignite, so unless you have another box you'll want to have another plan ready.

Cover with a Lid and Remove Heat: Perhaps the best option for extinguishing a grease fire is to cover the pan with the proper lid, or a cookie sheet if it covers the entire pan. Then, turn off the heat. Then, let it be. Don't lift the lid too soon or the fire will flash up again. If there is a tight fitting cover the lack of oxygen will smother the fire. But, it may take a minute. Then, let it sit so it continues to cool. If you can, carefully slide the pan from away from the burner. But, don't carry the pan across the kitchen or to the sink. Leave it on the stove until it cools.

Any of these options will work for most fires as long as the grease is contained within the pan. Water will cause the grease to boil out of the pan, increasing in intensity and quickly spreading.

Next month we'll discuss some ideas for providing outreach and raising awareness. As well as looking at different types of extinguishers and the best type(s) for use in the kitchen.

Have a safe and happy holiday season with your friends and family. Remember, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year's Day are the busiest days of the year for candle fires. Still need gift ideas? Try a flameless candle.

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Tim has been active with The Center for Campus Fire Safety since its inception and served as treasurer from 2007 to 2010.



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