



Public Safety Building, 312 E. Fifth St.
Muscatine, IA 52761
(563) 263-9233
Fax (563) 263-5534

FIRE DEPARTMENT

For more information contact:

Kevin Jenison
Communication Manager
Public Information Officer
Muscatine City Hall
(563) 264-1550
kjenison@muscataineiowa.gov

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GRILLING SAFETY TIPS AS MEMORIAL DAY APPROACHES

Be safety conscious no matter what fuel you use for your outdoor cookouts

MUSCATINE, IOWA - Often considered the unofficial kick-off to summer, Memorial Day weekend is synonymous with outdoor celebrations and cookouts. With the holiday just around the corner and the warmer months upon us, the Muscatine Fire Department and the National Fire Protection Association® (NFPA®) want to ensure that people understand where potential grilling risks exist and ways to minimize them.

"Because outdoor grilling involves the use of a fuel source to generate an open flame, it inherently presents potential fire risks that need to be taken seriously," said Lorraine Carli, vice president of Outreach and Advocacy at NFPA.

Muscatine Fire Marshal Mike Hartman, who is also the Assistant Fire Chief for the Muscatine Fire Department, emphasized the importance of paying attention and taking proper precautions with whatever fuel source you use. Keeping water and a fire extinguisher close is a major part of fire safety.



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"While we usually do not have a lot of calls involving outdoor cooking, they do occur," Hartman said. "From coals dumped too close to a house, to overfilled liquid propane tanks, to grills placed too close to the house, it doesn't take much for an enjoyable outdoor experience to turn bad."

Grills need to be spaced away from flammable material, especially vinyl siding that can be disfigured by the heat or even catch fire. If you use LP gas to cook with, make sure the tank is properly filled, the connections are properly attached, and you have the lid open when lighting. If the lid is down, the gas has a chance to build up and could cause a fireball when ignited.

"Just the simple things to keep in mind when grilling outdoors," Hartman said. "And that includes the proper disposal of charcoal if that is the fuel you use."

Charcoal ash should be allowed to cool, then wrapped in aluminum foil before being disposed of. Most commercial briquettes cannot be deposited around plants due to the chemicals in them. If you want to use charcoal ash around plants, use natural wood charcoal.

Hartman also reminded outdoor chefs to avoid moving the grill inside the garage during times of inclement weather.

"The risk of some flammable material catching fire or the health risks associated with the smoke from the grill are not worth the risk," Hartman said.

NFPA data shows that between 2017 and 2021, U.S. fire departments responded to an annual average of 11,421 home fires involving grills, hibachis, or barbecues, including 5,763 structure fires and 5,659 outside or unclassified fires. These fires caused an annual average of two civilian deaths, 176 reported civilian injuries, and \$172 million in direct property damage. July was the leading month for grilling fires (16 percent), followed by June (14 percent), May (12 percent) and August (11 percent); grilling fires in November through February accounted for four percent or less each year.



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According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), for the same fire-year period, an annual average of 22,155 patients went to emergency rooms because of injuries involving grills. Nearly half (47 percent) of the injuries were thermal burns, including both burns from fire and from contact with hot objects. These burns typically occurred when someone, often a child, bumped into, touched or fell on the grill, grill part or hot coals.

In fact, children under five accounted for an average of 2,820 of the contact-type burns (46 percent) per year.

"These numbers reinforce that grilling fires can and do happen. However, there's no need to avoid grilling during Memorial Day or in the months ahead," said Carli. "Instead, by following simple safety precautions, people can greatly reduce the risk of experiencing a grilling fire."

NFPA offers a wealth of tips, recommendations, and resources for grilling safely, including these key messages:

- For propane grills, check the gas tank for leaks before use in the months ahead. ([Watch NFPA's video on how to check for leaks.](#))
- Keep your grill clean by removing grease or fat buildup from the grills and in trays below the grill.
- Place the grill well away from the home, deck railings, and out from under eaves and overhanging branches.
- Always make sure your gas grill lid is open before lighting it.
- Keep children and pets at least three feet away from the grilling area.
- If you use starter fluid when charcoal grilling, only use charcoal starter fluid. Never add charcoal fluid or any other flammable liquids to the fire. When you have or are finished grilling, let the coals cool completely before disposing in a metal container.
- Never leave your grill unattended when in use.



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Using portable grills

Consider the following as you head out to the nearest campground, park or beach:

- Certain areas have restrictions regarding campfires and grills. Check if your area has any fire restrictions in place. Choose only those areas where fires are permitted.
- Check the fire danger rating in your area to determine if weather, or other factors make it dangerous to light a fire.

To start charcoal for cooking

- There are several ways to get the charcoal ready to use. Charcoal chimney starters allow you to ignite the charcoal using newspaper as a fuel:
- If you use a charcoal chimney, use a long match to avoid burning your fingers when lighting the paper
- If you choose to use lighter fluid, use only fluid intended for charcoal grills
- Never add charcoal starter fluid to coals or kindling that has already been ignited
- Never use gasoline or any other flammable liquid except charcoal starter or lighter fluid to start a charcoal fire

While cooking

- Place the grill well away from overhanging branches according to the manufacturer's instructions
- Place the grill a safe distance from lawn games, play areas and foot traffic
- Keep children and pets, and anything that can burn like food wrappers, an oven mitt or towel, at least 3-feet away from open flames and the grill
- Use long-handled grilling tools to give the chef plenty of clearance from heat and flames
- Have an adult present at all times when a campfire or grill is burning. Keep the fire small and never leave a fire unattended!

To dispose of charcoal after cooking

- Before going to sleep or leaving the area, douse the fire with water and make sure the area is cool to the touch.



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- Five percent of outside or unclassified grill fires occurred in a lawn, field or open area
- Empty the coals into a metal container with a tight-fitting lid that is used only to collect coals
 - Place the container outside and away from anything that can burn
 - Never empty coals directly into a trash can
 - Store the charcoal starter fluid out of reach of children and away from heat source

NFPA offers these additional [resources for grilling safely](#).

About the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)

Founded in 1896, NFPA is a global self-funded nonprofit organization devoted to eliminating death, injury, property and economic loss due to fire, electrical and related hazards. The association delivers information and knowledge through more than 300 consensus codes and standards, research, training, education, outreach and advocacy; and by partnering with others who share an interest in furthering the NFPA mission. For more information, visit www.nfpa.org.

All NFPA codes and standards can be viewed online for free at www.nfpa.org/freeaccess.

Contact: [Lorraine Carli](#), Public Affairs Office: +1 617 984-7275

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