

Gas Grills



Background: A previous NJPHA safety bulletin touched on some concerns regarding summertime grilling. The following expands on that earlier bulletin.

A new study of gas grill fires conducted by the United States Fire Administration (USFA) reveals:

- Grill fires on residential properties result in an estimated average of 10 deaths, 100 injuries, and \$37 million in property loss each year.
- Almost half (49 percent) of grill fires on residential properties occur from 5 to 8 p.m.
- Over half (57 percent) of grill fires on residential properties occur in the 4 months of May, June, July, and August.
- Thirty-two percent of grill fires on residential properties start on patios, terraces, screened-in porches, or courtyards, while an additional 24 percent start on exterior balconies and unenclosed porches.
- The leading category of equipment power source is “gas fuels” (79 percent). Within this category, propane is the power source in 69 percent of all grill fires on residential properties.
- “Heat from powered equipment” is the leading heat source category for grill fires on residential properties (47 percent). Within this category, spark, ember, or flame from operating equipment accounts for 28 percent of all grill fires on residential properties.
- The leading category of factors contributing to ignition is “mechanical failure, malfunction” (35 percent). Within this category, leaks or breaks of containers or pipes account for 23 percent of all grill fires on residential properties.

The New Jersey Uniform Fire Code identifies propane gas grills as a serious hazard when they are placed on apartment balconies. This specific rule only applies to gas grills. Regular charcoal grills are not affected by this rule. Specifically, gas grills shall not be used under building overhangs, under cover of any building and not within five feet of the building. The rule does not prohibit the use, only the area of use.

The primary source for regulation of use of outdoor cooking apparatus should be your local fire marshal, who not only brings fire prevention expertise, but also the authority of local code enforcement to the problem. Take advantage of this resource if possible for establishing a position, and for educating tenants on fire prevention issues.

It should be clearly communicated that use of grills, whether they are charcoal-burning or propane-fueled, are not acceptable on balconies. At minimum, cooking should be done at least twenty feet from the building. Grills need to be attended at all times when in use. A fire extinguisher should be available for emergency purposes. Propane bottles should never be brought into the building. As an alternative, consider designating an area for tenant cooking that is an appropriate distance from buildings and clear of other hazards.

Make Fire Safety a Priority

Communicate fire safety tips to tenants:

- Only use your barbeque grill outside. Grills are not designed to be used in a trailer, tent, garage, or house. Carbon monoxide can build-up and poison you.
- Setup a grill in an open area away from buildings, overhead combustible surfaces, dry leaves or brush. Be sure to avoid high traffic areas and always barbeque in a well ventilated area. Be aware of windblown sparks.
- Keep a multipurpose (ABC) fire extinguisher within easy reach.
- Wear clothing that does not have hanging frills or apron strings, and use flame retardant mitts when adjusting hot vents.
- Never leave a grill unattended once it is lit.
- Use long-handled utensils to avoid burns and splatters.
- Never attempt to move a hot grill.
- If using a charcoal grill, gasoline should never be used in place of charcoal lighter fluid. Never reapply charcoal lighter fluid after the fire has started; the flames can ignite the vapors, and travel up to the can causing an explosion.

Grills manufactured after October 1, 1995, are required to have three additional safety features to eliminate leak hazards: 1) a device to limit the flow of gas in the event of hose rupture; 2) a mechanism to shut-off the grill; and 3) a feature to prevent the flow of gas if the connection between the tank and the grill is not leak proof. Consumers should consider upgrading to grills that have these safety features. (Sources: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and NFPA)

It is important to check gas grills for leaks. The easiest and most economical way to check is to pour liquid dish detergent on all fittings and connections and along the rubber supply hose. Then turn on the cylinder — if bubbles appear you have a leak at that spot. If a leak is found, shut off the gas supply immediately and replace or repair the leaking part. Pay special attention to the venturi tubes (metal tubes that carry gas to the burner); spiders will often spin webs in the tubes of gas grills. This would interfere with the flow of gas, making the flame uneven and dangerous. Always store the gas cylinder in an upright position and in areas where the temperature will not exceed 125 degrees.

Grills, hibachis, and barbecues on residential properties continue to be a high fire risk and, on average, result in more injuries and slightly higher dollar losses when compared to all other fires. As a result, it is crucial that each of our members diligently encourage fire safety when residents are cooking on one of these pieces of equipment.

Practicing fire safety can prevent these fires and their resultant injuries, deaths, and property loss.

If you have questions, please contact your Risk Management Consultant, or Jim Rhoads, NJPHA-JIF Safety Director, 610-937-2694, or e-mail james_rhoads@pmagroup.com

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