

Script – Print - Staying safe around the grill

Summer is a time for being outdoors, grilling your favorite foods for various social gatherings. While your guests will be lining up for mouth-watering burgers and brats, medical experts say it's important to play it safe before igniting that first flame.

The first thing is to make sure your gas grill is ready. If the grill is not primed correctly, it could lead up to a buildup of gas that can explode. "Some people try to light them with matches or gasoline or try to do some crazy things," says Stathis Poulakidas, MD, Burn Center Medical Director at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center in Rockford. "We want people to be safe and use common sense."

The bigger concern is when people use lighter fluid with charcoal. Some people like to pour too much lighter fluid for a good burn which can quickly create flash burns and cause significant burns.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), nearly 20,000 people are treated every year in emergency departments due to injuries involving grills. More than 10,500 home fires are started by grills each year. July is the peak month for grill fires, followed by June, May and August.

Dr. Poulakidas treats many different injuries throughout the summer – from burns to eyelashes and eyebrows – to significant burns that require skin grafting. The Burn Center sees injuries from grilling, fireworks and burning leaves.

One practical tip is to become familiar with your grill – especially if it's new. Not knowing how to use the grill is one of the biggest hazards, according to Dr. Poulakidas. For example, improper installation of gas tanks can cause them to explode.

Also, keep the grill outdoors and away from potential hazards.

"Garages are a very dangerous place," says Dr. Poulakidas. "You think 'I'm going to get out of the rain, or I'll be able to grill year-round' and it's going to be warm and safe. But you have turpentine, gasoline, all different types of gas products in the garage that you might use for your lawn mowers or weed eaters."

If you get lighter fluid on your skin, move away from the grill, and wash your hands and arms to ensure that when you do light the flame it doesn't catch fire to your arms as well.

And get a fire extinguisher if you don't already have one. "I really believe everybody should probably have a fire extinguisher in their home without question," says Dr. Poulakidas. "Having a fire extinguisher close to a grill site is probably the best piece of advice that I can offer."

Remember those burgers and brats? They are loaded with fats, oils and grease that tend to cause any flame to intensify. "You should have good control and setup and instead of having them directly on the fire, maybe put them a level up if you have a two-tiered grill to minimize that grease falling on the pit and actually flaming up significantly," says Dr. Poulakidas.

Dr. Poulakidas is looking forward to grilling this summer, too. He says the best way for everyone to enjoy the summer with family and friends is to play it smart around the grill and avoid being one of the thousands of people who end up in the hospital.

Grilling Safety tips

- Propane and charcoal grills should only be used outdoors
- The grills should be placed away from the home and never in the garage
- Keep children and pets at least three feet away from the grill area
- Avoid using wire brushes to clean the grill. Use nylon scrapers or wool brushes instead
- Keep the grill clean by removing grease or fat build-up from the grills and trays below
- Never leave the grill unattended
- Always make sure the gas grill lid is open before lighting it
- Avoid drugs and alcohol while grilling