

# Watch the



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Those are the choices you have with microwave popcorn. No one knows that lesson better than a co-worker. Having returned from his lunchtime workout, he tossed a bag of popcorn into the microwave as usual, pressed the two-minute button, and hit the shower. He emerged from the locker room to the smell of burnt popcorn. “It was so strong I was surprised it hadn’t set off an alarm,” he said.

The co-worker went on to explain he knew the label on the bag says, “Never pop unattended,” but he always figured that phrase just was lawyer-speak. “I’ve never heard of a problem, and, besides,” he added, “I have a routine to follow.”

I also read a story about a guy who had gone to bed and was awakened by his roommate hollering, “Oh, no—the popcorn is on fire!” He jumped out of bed and ran into the kitchen to find thick smoke billowing from the new, mega-powerful microwave his grandmother had given him. The smoke alarm also was beeping away.

The roommate never before had made microwave popcorn, so he didn’t realize the instructions really meant not to leave the popcorn unattended. As many a late-night office person can tell you, popcorn is different from other food you just stick in the microwave and walk away from until it’s done. Kernels that don’t pop can overheat, and, if there are enough of them, the bag will catch on fire.

In this case, the roommate had the foresight to grab a fire extinguisher and spray

down the microwave. The fire and smoke stopped almost immediately, but then came the chore of cleaning up the mess. Stuff from the fire extinguisher had gone everywhere—not just in the kitchen—and the whole house reeked of smoke. Open the windows, you say? There was one slight problem: It was winter-time, and half the windows were iced shut.

A little more research uncovered a story about hospital officials who learned a little education makes a difference in the level of care people take when using microwave ovens. It seems the hospital rang up \$16,000 in false-alarm fines from a local fire department (\$500 for each incident). The problem was that employees would put food in the microwave—including popcorn—then set the wrong amount of time and leave the area to get some work done. When they returned, the lunchroom often would be filled with smoke.

The hospital’s safety officer circulated a memo to all employees, pointing out the hospital had to pay a fine each time a false alarm required the fire department to respond unnecessarily. The memo also explained that a false alarm could slow the fire department’s response to a real emergency. To emphasize the point, the safety officer placed stickers on each microwave, warning, “Do not leave microwave unattended; false alarms result in a \$500 fine.” The number of false alarms dropped significantly.

# Or Wish You Had...



If you want to avoid such problems, simply follow these 10 easy steps to microwave-popping success:

- 1.** Always make sure the oven is clean. A dirty oven decreases its efficiency.
- 2.** Remove the plastic overwrap and unfold the bag, making sure it has no holes, tears or broken seals. If steam escapes too soon, the bag will not inflate properly, and the popcorn will scorch.
- 3.** Remove the metal rack if your oven has one. The rack could hinder inflation of the bag.
- 4.** If you're using a microwave oven with a carousel, make sure the bag is centered (with proper side down) on it and can rotate freely. The bag stopping could cause the popcorn to scorch. Do not use a plastic turntable, which only can withstand temperatures to 400 degrees Fahrenheit. Any microwave popcorn that you use can reach temperatures around 450 to 500 degrees Fahrenheit.
- 5.** Microwave one bag of popcorn at a time. More than one bag at a time will take

the microwave energy away from the popcorn and produce poor results.

**6.** For best results (higher pop volume and fewer unpopped kernels), pre-heat the microwave by heating a cup of water for one minute on high. Carefully remove the cup of water before popping the corn. Never turn on your microwave oven when it's empty because you could damage the magnetron tube. The cup of water will absorb the microwave energy and prevent damage to this tube.

**7.** If poor popping results occur, try raising the popcorn off the oven floor by placing an inverted glass pie plate under the popcorn. Do not use plastic or paper; it can melt or scorch.

**8.** Set your microwave oven on the manufacturer's recommended time. High-power models (e.g., 1,100 watts) may take just over 1.5 minutes. Listen carefully and stop the microwave when rapid popping slows to two or three seconds between pops. Note the popping time and set accordingly for the next bag.

**9.** Stopping and restarting your microwave oven while popping can produce poor results. It's better to start out at a higher period of time and remove the corn when the rapid popping slows.

**10.** Don't leave your microwave unattended while popping corn. Adult supervision is recommended. It's important to watch the bag to make sure it inflates properly while the popcorn is popping. A bag that hasn't inflated right will scorch very quickly. ■