

Inattention, busy lives contribute to kitchen fires

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Chances are, we've all seen distracted drivers on the roads. People using their cell phones, putting on makeup, eating or focusing on some other task while behind the wheel.

But at home, inattentive cooking is a concern that's been on the rise, not just in Austin but statewide, according to [Austin Fire Chief Mickey Healey](#).

"We don't concentrate on simple tasks anymore," Healey said. "We try to do three, four things at a time. I think that's where we run into a lot of our safety issues."

The number of calls the department has responded to involving cooking fires has grown over the past couple years. There were 34 cooking fires in 2011 contained to the pan or stove, compared to 21 in 2010 and 16 in 2009.

In the past five years, fires have increased, he said, because of all the new ingredients in cooking. Cooking is being done with healthier oils, a trend that started in fast-food restaurants about a decade ago. As we go to more of a man-made product, fires burn hotter and become more intense, and fires can start more easily in homes, Healey said.

Probably the biggest reason for the increase in cooking-fire calls, though, is a lack of attention. People start cooking on the stove, then they turn to their television, the Internet, or their cell phones, Healey said.

Many newer ovens and stoves also have glass tops, so they stay hotter for a longer period of time. It can be deceiving if you try to set a towel or something down on that hot surface. It goes back to people not paying attention, "and that's where we're getting a lot of these fires," Healey said.

With the cultural diversity in Austin, there are differences that also contribute to some of the fire calls, Healey said. For example, some Indian cuisines use a lot of oils and seasonings "that can flash." The fire department has also been called to a couple of fires that occurred when people were making soap in the oven, a practice in their culture.

Austin's fire department is trying to get one of the state fire marshal's three kitchen trailers for a couple of days at the Mower County Fair. The demonstration creates a kitchen fire in the trailer, then trained firefighters show people how to put them out.