

Childproofing the Kitchen

Many people consider the kitchen the heart of the home, and families often spend a lot of time there. It's also one of the more challenging rooms in the house to childproof. A number of dangers lurk in the average kitchen, but with careful planning, you'll be able to keep your baby safe. Here's how:

- Keep detergents, pesticides, cleaning products, and any other toxic household chemicals locked up, preferably in a high cabinet. "Child-safety locks are most useful when a baby's between 6 and 25 months old," says Anne Altman, a childproofing consultant and contractor in Santa Rosa, California. "But leave latches on after that age. The latches define consistent limits that a child recognizes." Unfortunately, some wily babies figure out how to unhook safety latches. If your baby's one of them, you'll need to put all dangerous items in out-of-reach storage areas or use a safety gate to keep him out of the kitchen.
- Consider switching from hazardous chemicals such as chlorine bleach and ammonia glass cleaner to safer products such as non-chlorine bleach, vinegar, borax, beeswax, mineral oil, and compressed-air drain openers.
- Buy products (including kitchen chemicals as well as vitamins and medications) with child-resistant caps, and keep everything in its original container. Never transfer a hazardous product into a generic container or, worse yet, a food container, as this could lead to a dangerous mix-up.
- Store knives and other sharp tools, such as food-processor blades, in latched drawers or high cabinets. Peelers, graters, and other kitchen utensils can also be sharp and should be treated just like knives. Glassware and china should also be stored high up.
- Move the toaster, coffeemaker, and all other electrical appliances out of your child's reach. Unplug them and hide the cords when they're not in use.
- Keep grapes, raisins, coins, and other choking hazards off of low surfaces.
- Never leave glassware, knives, or hot food and beverages unattended on counters or tables, not even for a few moments. Don't use placemats or tablecloths, because a child can pull them — and their contents — down on himself.
- Set aside at least one cabinet for your baby to open and explore. Pick a cabinet that's not too close to the stove and oven, and fill it with safe but interesting objects, such as lightweight saucepans, wooden spoons, foil pie plates, and empty yogurt containers. This should keep your baby happily distracted, and he'll probably no longer try to empty the other cabinets — unless you leave the doors open. Change the contents occasionally to give him a surprise.
- Use the back burners on the stove whenever possible. If you must use the front ones, turn the pot handles toward the back. Put latches on the doors to the oven, microwave, and refrigerator, and install knob covers on all stove knobs so your child can't turn on the burners. If you have a gas stove, you may be able to easily remove the dials when you're not cooking.
- Close your trash compactor and dishwasher when not in use. Dishwasher detergent could be toxic if your child eats it, so don't put any into the dishwasher until you're ready to run it.
- Install a fire extinguisher where the risk of fire is greatest, such as near the stove or fireplace. Make sure you know how to use it, but only attempt to extinguish a fire if it's small and contained. Otherwise, get your children out of the house and call the fire department from a neighbor's home.
- Put a lid on your trash can. Keep recyclable cans and bottles in bins or bags stored out of your child's reach. Dispose of anything else that's dangerous — such as sharp metal can lids or broken glass — by taking it immediately out to the trash.
- Use the straps when your baby's in his highchair, and never leave him unattended.
- When carrying a hot beverage in one hand, don't attempt to hold your baby with the other. And make sure you know where your baby is when you're carrying something hot so that you don't trip on him. Consider equipping your kitchen faucet with an anti-scalding device.
- If it's too difficult to watch your baby and cook at the same time, put him in a play yard nearby so he can be part of the action and still stay safe.