# Understanding NFPA Hood Cleaning Standards for Commercial Kitchens

If you run a commercial kitchen, you already know that grease is more than a cleaning nuisance. It is a fire hazard that can turn a busy dinner service into a disaster. The National Fire Protection Association publishes a set of guidelines that every restaurant owner, chef, and facility manager should know by heart. These are the NFPA hood cleaning standards, and they are not just a suggestion. They are the baseline for keeping your kitchen exhaust system safe, your insurance valid, and your fire marshal happy.

I have spent years working with hood cleaning service teams and kitchen managers, and I have seen what happens when these standards are ignored. Grease buildup in the exhaust duct and around the exhaust fan creates a fuel source that a small spark can ignite. The NFPA hood cleaning standards exist to prevent exactly that scenario. They tell you how often to clean, what parts of the system to inspect, and what level of cleanliness is acceptable. Following them is one of the smartest investments you can make in restaurant fire safety.

## What Are the NFPA Hood Cleaning Standards?

The National Fire Protection Association produces a document called NFPA 96, which is the standard for ventilation control and fire protection of commercial cooking operations. NFPA 96 covers everything from the design of the kitchen exhaust system to the maintenance of the fire suppression system. The NFPA hood cleaning standards are the specific requirements within NFPA 96 that deal with cleaning frequency and methods for grease removal.

NFPA 96 states that hoods, grease filters, exhaust ducts, and exhaust fans must be cleaned at intervals that prevent grease from accumulating to a dangerous level. The standard does not give a one-size-fits-all cleaning schedule. Instead, it says that the cleaning frequency depends on the volume of cooking and the type of food being prepared. A high-volume fast food kitchen that runs fryers all day will need more frequent cleaning than a small cafe that bakes pastries. The key is that the cleaning must happen often enough so that no part of the system has heavy grease buildup.

Many local fire codes adopt NFPA 96 by reference, which means these standards become law in your area. Ignoring them can lead to fines, forced closure, or even criminal liability if a fire occurs. I have seen a restaurant shut down for a week because the fire inspector found grease dripping from the exhaust duct. That is a costly lesson that could have been avoided by following the NFPA hood cleaning standards.



## How Often Should You Clean Your Hood System?

The NFPA hood cleaning standards divide commercial kitchens into categories based on cooking load. For systems that serve solid fuel cooking, such as wood or charcoal, cleaning is required monthly. For high-volume cooking operations like busy restaurants and pizzerias, the standard recommends quarterly cleaning. Moderate-volume kitchens, like those in hotels or chain restaurants, can usually get by with semi-annual cleaning. Low-volume operations, such as churches or daycares that only cook occasionally, may only need annual cleaning.

But frequency is only part of the equation. The standard also requires that after each cleaning, the entire kitchen exhaust system be left in a condition where no visible grease remains. That means the hood interior, the grease filters, the exhaust duct from the hood to the exhaust fan, and the fan itself must all be free of grease deposits. Many hood cleaning service providers will document this with before and after photos, which is a good practice for insurance compliance and for your own records.

I recommend keeping a log of every cleaning, including the date, the work done, and the name of the company that performed it. If your fire inspector asks to see your maintenance records, you want to be able to show a clear history of compliance with the NFPA hood cleaning standards.

## The Role of Professional Hood Cleaning

While it is possible for in-house staff to clean some parts of the system, most commercial kitchens rely on a professional hood cleaning service. These companies have the equipment, training, and chemicals needed to remove baked-on grease from hard-to-reach areas. They also know what the fire inspector looks for during a kitchen hood inspection. A good service will clean the entire system, including the exhaust duct, which is often the most neglected part.

When you hire a hood cleaning service, make sure they are certified and insured. Ask about their hood cleaner certification and whether they follow the NFPA hood cleaning standards. Some states require hood cleaners to hold specific credentials, and your insurance company may require proof of certification. Do not assume that a low price means a thorough job. I have seen cheap cleanings that only spray the outside of the hood and call it done. That will not pass inspection, and it will not protect your kitchen from a grease fire.

## Components That Need Regular Attention

The kitchen exhaust system has several parts that must be cleaned and inspected regularly. The grease filters, usually made of aluminum or stainless steel, trap grease particles before they enter the ductwork. These filters should be removed and cleaned daily, or at least whenever they become visibly saturated. Some filters are dishwasher safe, but many require manual scraping and degreasing.

The hood itself, including its interior surfaces and the area around the fire suppression system, needs to be wiped down and degreased during every professional cleaning. The exhaust duct, which runs from the hood to the roof, is a common trouble spot. Grease can accumulate inside the duct even if the filters are changed regularly, because small particles still get through. If the duct has horizontal runs, grease can pool in low spots and create a serious fire risk. The NFPA hood cleaning standards require that the entire duct be cleaned to bare metal.



The exhaust fan at the roof or side of the building also needs attention. Grease can build up on the fan blades, causing the fan to become unbalanced and eventually fail. A failing fan reduces airflow, which makes the hood less effective at capturing smoke and grease. That leads to even faster buildup in the system. Regular cleaning of the fan is essential for both fire safety and system performance.

Finally, the fire suppression system itself must be inspected and serviced according to its manufacturer's specifications and local fire code. This system, which includes a chemical agent stored in a tank and connected to nozzles in the hood and duct, is your last line of defense. If a fire starts, the suppression system should activate automatically and put it out before it spreads. But if the system is not maintained, it may not work when you need it. The National Fire Protection Association also publishes standards for fire suppression systems, including UL 300, which covers the testing and listing of these systems.

## Cost and Value of Compliance

Hood cleaning cost varies depending on the size of your system, the frequency of cleaning, and the region where you are located. A typical cleaning for a medium-sized restaurant might cost between $300 and $600 per visit. High-volume kitchens or systems with long, complex duct runs can cost more. Some companies offer contracts that reduce the per-cleaning price in exchange for a commitment to regular service.

When you compare the cost of professional hood cleaning to the potential cost of a grease fire, the choice is easy. A single fire can destroy your kitchen, shut down your business for weeks,

and cost you tens of thousands of dollars in repairs and lost revenue. Your insurance company may also require proof of regular cleaning to keep your policy active. If you skip cleanings and a fire occurs, the insurance company could deny your claim for negligence. That is a risk no restaurant owner should take.

I have worked with kitchens that tried to save money by doing their own cleanings or hiring unlicensed amateurs. In every case, they ended up paying more in the long run. Either the fire inspector cited them for violations, or they had to pay for a professional cleaning anyway to fix the mess. Following the NFPA hood cleaning standards from the start is the most cost-effective approach.

## Common Misconceptions About Hood Cleaning

One myth I hear often is that if the grease filters are clean, the rest of the system does not need attention. That is false. Filters catch the larger particles, but smaller grease particles still pass through and accumulate in the ductwork. Over time, that grease buildup becomes a fire hazard regardless of how clean the filters are.



Another misconception is that hood cleaning is only about passing inspection. In reality, a clean system operates more efficiently. A clean exhaust fan moves more air, which keeps the kitchen cooler and reduces the load on your HVAC system. Grease containment is also better when the system is clean, which means less grease on your walls, floors, and equipment. That makes the whole kitchen easier to clean and safer to work in.

Some people think that once a year is enough for any kitchen. But the NFPA hood cleaning standards are clear that frequency must match the cooking volume. If you are cooking with grease daily, you need quarterly cleaning at a minimum. Annual cleaning is only appropriate for very low-volume operations. Check with your local fire department to see what schedule they enforce in your area.

## Final Thoughts

Understanding and following the NFPA hood cleaning standards is not just about avoiding fines. It is about protecting your staff, your customers, and your business. Grease fires are one of the most common causes of restaurant fires, and they are almost always preventable with proper maintenance. Make hood cleaning a priority, hire a reputable service, and keep detailed records. Your fire inspector will notice, your insurance company will appreciate it, and your kitchen will be a safer place to work.