

How to Create a Strong Burning Charcoal Fire Without Lighter Fluid

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The taste of lighter fluid can ruin your barbecue, and it imparts chemicals on your meat and grill that may not be safe to ingest in large quantities. Luckily, there is a variety of other ways to get your grill going, and keep it going, that require little more than some newspaper and a chimney starter if you have one.

Things You'll Need

- ☐ Chimney starter - very inexpensive and you'll never need lighter fluid again
- ☐ Charcoal
- ☐ Matches or a candle/fireplace lighter
- ☐ Newspaper

Method 1

Method 1 of 3: How to Use a Chimney Starter



- 1** Know that inexpensive chimney starters are the easiest way to get a strong fire every time. Usually sold for under \$30, chimney starters use newspaper and heat convection to evenly light up your charcoal briquets. You can then safely dump them into your grill and get cooking within 15-20 minutes.



2 Load the bottom of the chimney starter with lightly balled newspaper. Between 2 and 4 pieces of paper, depending on the size of the starter, should do. Don't ball it up very tightly, simply crumple it into loose balls so that hot air can fill in the spaces. These will eventually light your charcoals.

- If your chimney doesn't have a solid bottom, place the paper on the charcoal grate of your grill and lower the chimney on top of it.



3 Fill the top of the starter fully with charcoal briquets. Take your favorite charcoal and fill the chimney starter all the way to the top. You should be able to access the paper from the bottom.



4 Light the paper in several place from the bottom and set it on your grill. The paper will quickly heat up, and the hot air and burning paper will ignite the bottom coals. Once the paper burns out, the coals will light each other, as hot air is pulled through the bottom of the chimney and through the coals.[1]

- The chimney will quickly heat up, so place it on a flame-proof, sturdy surface as the coals heat. The grill, already prepared for you to dump your coals, is a great place, as is a brick patio (though it will potentially leave burn marks).



5 Dump the coals on the grill when the top pieces are covered gray. This usually only takes 10-15 minutes. Once you dump the coals, you'll be ready to grill.[2] Most chimneys are dumped by carefully turning them upside down over the grill, but higher-end models may have a release switch which dumps the coals from the bottom. Dump the coals where you want them instead of dumping in the middle then trying to move them -- they may break up and lose heat if they are constantly picked up and moved.

- If you plan to grill for more than 30 minutes, add 2-3 handfuls of charcoal now to keep the fire going when you need it.[3]



6 Make sure the vents are open for a larger fire. Open vents send more air and oxygen to the fire, helping it grow quickly. Keep the lid open as you position the coals and sear anything you want to grill, then close it to smoke the meat or cook it more slowly.

Method
2

Method 2 of 3: How to Start a Fire with Newspaper



1 Open the bottom vents and clean out the ash. You need good, consistent airflow to get your fire going, as the charcoal needs oxygen to burn. Make sure to dump any ash, as this takes up space needed for proper airflow, and to leave the vents completely open.



2 Crumple up 4-5 pieces of newspaper and place them in the center grill. Make a small pile of newspaper in the middle of the charcoal grate. You can also use the paper of the charcoal bag too. Paper lights quickly, and the flame from the paper will help the charcoal catch.

- If you are struggling to light your fires with newspaper alone, soak half the paper in olive, canola, or vegetable oil. The oil will cause the paper to burn slower, which may give the charcoal more time to catch. This DIY solution, though far from perfect, has a lot of proponents as a natural alternative to lighter fluid.^[4]



3 Place small, dry sticks on top of your newspaper. Kindling, which is small wood pieces used to start a fire, has a higher flaming point than paper, which will help light the charcoal. Place a handful of kindling on top and around your paper, making a little nest of sorts. The paper will light the kindling, and the kindling and paper together will light the briquets.

- If the sticks easily snap in your hands, making a loud popping sound, they are dry enough to use.
- Have a spare handful of kindling nearby as well, in case the fire needs extra fuel.
- If you don't have any stick around, use extra paper. You may have to keep feeding it into the fire until the briquets catch, however, so have several pieces handy.



4 Place 3-4 pieces of charcoal on top of your pile. These are going to start the fire for the rest of your charcoal. Place them near the center and rest them on the sticks. As the paper crumbles below, you want to still have some flames beneath the briquets.

- While briquets (the small square pieces of charcoal) will burn for longer, hardwood charcoal is easier to catch and burns hotter initially.



5 Ignite the paper from several places. Use a match or a fire-starter to light several corners of the paper, getting a nice bright fire going. You should notice the kindling starting to catch in the big, leaping flames created by the paper.

- If the stick haven't quite caught as the paper is dying out, loosely crumple up 1-2 more pieces and place them on the edges, near the sticks.



6 Get the charcoal smoking. If you see gray or white edges of ash on the briquets and the pieces are smoking, you're in business. This process is slow, but it will eventually start a fire. Keep your lighter fire of kindling and newspaper going until you've got some ash on the outside of the pieces.



7 Slowly add more pieces of charcoal to the fire you've made. Once you've got the first few briquets smoking you can start adding more pieces, one after the other. A strong charcoal fire does not look like a wood fire -- if you see white or gray ash developing on the outside of the squares, you should be good to go. You will not likely see, however, large licking flames.^[5]

- Keep adding briquets until you have a large pile in the center of the grill. The inner briquets, for now, will be the only hot ones. You should see smoke coming up from the center of your pile. Depending on the size of your grill, you'll need a different amount of briquets:
- Small, personal grills can usually get by with 25-30 pieces.
- Medium size grills, like the most common 22" grill, should have roughly 40 briquets.
- Large grills may need anywhere from 1-2 bags of charcoal, and will take a long time to get hot using this method.



8 Wait to distribute your coals for cooking until they are mostly covered in **white/gray ash**. The inside of the pile will be glowing bright red with heat. This means you are ready to cook. Add any more briquets you might want if the fire has gotten small, and then place the charcoal in its desired location with a pair of long-handled tongs. This can take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour.

Method
3

Method 3 of 3: How to Build and Maintain a Strong Fire



1 Keep your coals close together for a strong burning fire. You want to keep the coals packed together, where they will conserve heat and burn hot. That said, they also need some airflow to burn best, so don't crowd them so much that they are tightly in a line. A loose pile is perfect. There are several methods of grilling to keep your fire burning strong:

- **Even Grilling** coats the entire bottom of the grill with 2 layers of briquets. There are no spaces and everything is added evenly, allowing the whole grill to reach a consistent, even temperature. Use this if you need to cook a lot of food quickly.
- **Two-Zone Grilling** Allows you to keep half the area open for indirect cooking or warming food. You need to shuffle half the charcoals into an even pile on one half of the grill, making sure there are 2-3 layers of briquets on the "hot half" of the grill.^[6]



2 Add more coals regularly to keep your grill burning. The coals will be hot enough, if they are red, glowing, and covered white, to get fresh charcoal burning. Do not wait until you're almost out of briquets. Instead, add the rest of the charcoal when you have roughly half of your charcoals remaining. You may have to wait 5-10 minutes, when the new coals are covered gray/white, to start cooking again, but this is better than reigniting the grill from scratch.

- If you plan on cooking for a long time, you should add 2-3 handfuls of coals every 30 minutes after the first set ignites.[7]



3 Keep the top and bottom vents open for maximum heat. The more air you get to the fire, the hotter it will cook. Fire needs oxygen to burn, so the more oxygen you provide the hotter you can get your charcoal fire. If you need to control the temperature, close one or both of the vents partially, usually the upper vent.



4 Empty the ash as it builds up. There is a small lever that lets you open and close the bottom vents on your grill, and this same lever can be used to remove ash through the vents. Ash takes up space for air and will smother the coals as it builds up.



5 Consider adding hardwood for added flavor and a hotter fire. Chunks of hickory or applewood add fantastic BBQ flavors, and the wood should catch quickly on the hot charcoals. While wood burns quicker and hotter than charcoal briquets, a combination of charcoal and wood or wood chips is often the best way to a professional fire.



6 Seal up any unused briquets. If you don't use a full bag of charcoal, use a clip to seal the top of the bag. The additives in the charcoal can evaporate, making them harder to light next time, especially without lighter fluid.^[8]



Community Q&A

Question

Can I use any old paper I have around the house?



Margaret Adams
Community Answer

There should not be a problem with using old paper to start your fire. I would use old newspaper or paper that you have in your shred pile. Be mindful of your location, as paper burns it tends to get lighter and can blow with the wind while still lit.

Helpful 7 Not Helpful 1

Question

Does the wood kindling affect the flavor of the food?



Community Answer

To a certain extent, yes. To an untrained palate it might not be that noticeable, but this is why certain woods are sought after for cooking (mesquite, hickory, etc.).

Helpful 4 Not Helpful 0

Question

Can I use tissue papers?



Community Answer

Yes, but they will burn very quickly.

Helpful 6 Not Helpful 5

Question

How about using brown paper bags?



Rob Esparza IV
Community Answer

You can use the paper bags, as long as they are not damp. You can use anything flammable, provided it is non-toxic.

Helpful ☐ Not Helpful ☐

Question

Can I use fatwood to start charcoal?



Rob Esparza IV
Community Answer

Fatwood is the best wood possible for starting fires. Go right ahead.

Helpful ☐ Not Helpful ☐



Tips

- You can **make your own chimney** by using a punch type can opener to make holes along the bottom edge of the side a large metal coffee can.



Warnings

- The most common mistake is to compress the newspaper too much.
- Start with a manageable amount of charcoal, then add more once it is started.
- Leaving your chimney starter unattended.

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