What You Need to Know About Professional Hood Cleaning

Running a commercial kitchen means dealing with grease every day. It coats the stovetops, clings to the walls, and settles inside the ventilation system. Over time, that buildup becomes a serious fire hazard. I have seen kitchens where the grease inside the ductwork was thick enough to drip, and the owners had no idea how dangerous that was. That is where professional hood cleaning comes in. It is not just about looking clean; it is about meeting fire codes and protecting your business.

Why Regular Cleaning Matters

Grease buildup is the number one cause of kitchen fires in restaurants. When a layer of grease lines the exhaust hood and ductwork, any spark from cooking can ignite it. The NFPA 96 standard exists specifically to address this risk. It requires commercial kitchens to keep their ventilation systems clean and to have a regular cleaning schedule. If you fail an inspection, your insurance might not cover a fire loss. I have talked to restaurant owners who thought they could handle cleaning with a mop and some degreaser. They were wrong. The grease inside the ductwork is often hard and baked on. It takes specialized tools and knowledge to remove it safely.

Professional hood cleaning services use methods like pressure washing and steam cleaning to break down that tough grease. They also inspect the fire suppression system and make sure the centrifugal fan is spinning freely. A clogged fan reduces airflow and makes the kitchen hotter and more dangerous. Regular cleaning keeps the fan working properly and extends the life of your equipment.

Understanding the Costs

The cost of professional hood cleaning varies based on several factors. The size of your hood canopy, the length and condition of your ductwork, and how often you need cleaning all play a role. A small restaurant with a single exhaust hood might pay less than a large cafeteria with multiple hoods. If your kitchen produces a lot of grease, you will need more frequent cleaning. Some companies charge by the hour, while others quote a flat rate. It is a good idea to get quotes from at least three providers and ask what is included. Some services only clean the hood and filters, leaving the ductwork for an extra fee. That is not enough. The entire ventilation system needs attention.



I have seen places that tried to save money by skipping professional cleaning and using a crew that just wiped the outside of the hood. The inside was still caked with grease. That kind of shortcut can cost you more in the long run. A fire or a failed inspection can shut you down for days. The price of professional hood cleaning is small compared to the potential loss.

What the Process Involves

A thorough cleaning starts with protecting the cooking surfaces. The technician will cover your stoves and grills with plastic sheeting to keep debris from falling into food. Then they remove the grease filters and take them to a soak tank or clean them with a pressure washer. After that, they clean the hood canopy itself, scrubbing every surface until it is free of grease. The ductwork is next. That is where the real challenge lies. The ducts run from the hood to the roof, and they are often narrow and full of bends. Technicians use specialized brushes and sometimes steam cleaning equipment to dislodge the grease. They also clean the centrifugal fan and check the fire suppression system. The entire process can take several hours for a typical restaurant.

One company I worked with used a product called Earth's Pride for some of their degreasing. It is an enzymatic cleaner that breaks down grease without harsh chemicals. That is a good option for kitchens that want to reduce their environmental impact. But for heavy buildup, they still needed pressure washing and mechanical scrubbing. There is no magic solution for years of neglect.

Compliance and Safety Standards

The NFPA 96 standard is the benchmark for kitchen ventilation safety. It spells out how often you need to clean based on the type of cooking you do. For example, a restaurant that does a lot of frying might need cleaning every three months, while a bakery could go six months. Your local fire department enforces these rules. They will check your cleaning logs during an inspection. If your records show you have not had professional hood cleaning in the past year, you could face fines or even a shutdown order.

The fire suppression system is another critical component. It includes a network of pipes and nozzles that release a fire extinguisher agent if a fire starts under the hood. The system must be tested and maintained according to the manufacturer's specifications. Some systems are listed under UL 1047, which covers the safety of the equipment. A professional cleaning service will inspect the system and note any issues. They will not repair it themselves, but they will tell you if something is wrong. Then you call a licensed fire protection company to fix it.

I have seen kitchens where the cleaning crew accidentally damaged the suppression system by knocking a nozzle loose. That is why you want a trained technician who knows how to work around these systems. Do not let someone with a pressure washer just blast everything in sight. They need to understand the layout and the components.



Choosing a Service Provider

When you look for a company, ask about their experience with commercial cooking equipment. Do they follow the NFPA 96 guidelines? Do they provide a certificate of cleaning after each visit? That certificate is your proof for the fire inspector. Also ask if they clean the ductwork and the fan, not just the hood. Some companies offer a basic package that only covers the hood and filters. You want a full system clean.

Another thing to consider is whether they use scaffolding for high ceilings. Some kitchens have hoods that are 10 or 12 feet high. Cleaning those requires ladders or scaffolding to reach the ductwork safely. The technician should be comfortable working at height and have the proper equipment.

I have worked with a company that used a checklist for every job. They photographed the before and after of the hood, filters, ducts, and fan. That gave the restaurant owner a clear record of the work done. It also helped during inspections. The fire marshal could see that the ducts were clean all the way to the roof.

Setting a Schedule

The cleaning schedule depends on your volume and type of cooking. A fast-food place that fries chicken all day will need cleaning more often than a deli that mostly makes sandwiches. Your service provider can help you determine the right frequency. Most restaurants fall into a quarterly or monthly schedule. Some high-volume kitchens need cleaning every two weeks. Do not wait until you see grease dripping from the hood. By that point, you are already overdue.

Grease filters should be cleaned more frequently than the full system. You can wash them yourself in a dishwasher or soak tank, but the deep cleaning of the ductwork requires a professional. The filters are the first line of defense. If they are clogged, the fan has to work harder, and the grease will build up faster in the ducts.



One restaurant I know had a cleaning schedule that was based on the calendar rather than the actual condition of the kitchen. They called the cleaner every three months, but their fryer was running twelve hours a day. The ducts were packed with grease after two months. They ended up having an emergency cleaning when the fire inspector came by and saw the buildup. That cost them more than a regular monthly service would have.

Final Thoughts

Professional hood cleaning is not optional. It is a requirement of the restaurant fire code and a critical part of kitchen ventilation safety. The cost is a predictable expense that protects your business from fire, fines, and downtime. When you hire a qualified service, you get peace of mind knowing that your system is clean and compliant. Your staff works in a safer environment, and your equipment lasts longer. Do not cut corners on this. Your kitchen, your employees, and your customers depend on it.