



# NCAC NEWS

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\* For further details regarding each topic introduced below, refer to the following URL which contains the actual text of the reports released (PDF files) (Japanese only) :<http://www.kokusen.go.jp/news/news.html>

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\* Major abbreviated names: ADR: Alternative Dispute Resolution  
NCAC: National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan  
PIO-NET: Practical Living Information Online Network System

## I. Injury/fatal accident

1. **Smoke and flames inside microwave ovens: Beware stuck-on grime and avoid overheating food**

### **Purpose**

Microwave ovens are widely used on a regular basis in ordinary households. In addition to single-function microwave ovens, today there are many different kinds of microwave appliances available in stores, including

combination microwave/conventional ovens and steam microwaves.

Since April 2009, PIO-NET (Practical Living Information Online Network System) has received 669 inquiries and complaints<sup>(1)</sup> regarding the occurrence of smoke and flames in microwave ovens.<sup>(2)</sup> There is no single pattern to the occurrence of smoke and flames. In addition to reports of "sparks" from the inside compartment walls of the microwave, these inquiries and complaints have included reports about foods as well (e.g. "I was heating vegetables in the microwave when the vegetables burst into flames"). Moreover, incidents of smoke and flames have been reported for microwaves that were used for years by consumers, suggesting that accidents are occurring from accumulated grime inside the microwave ovens as well as from deteriorated performance over time.

Accordingly, in response to these inquiries and complaints, NCAC decided to test microwave ovens for the occurrence of smoke and flame on the inside compartment walls and from foods, and to provide consumers with information and issue a consumer alert.

<sup>(1)</sup> Data received since April 2009 and registered through January 31, 2015.

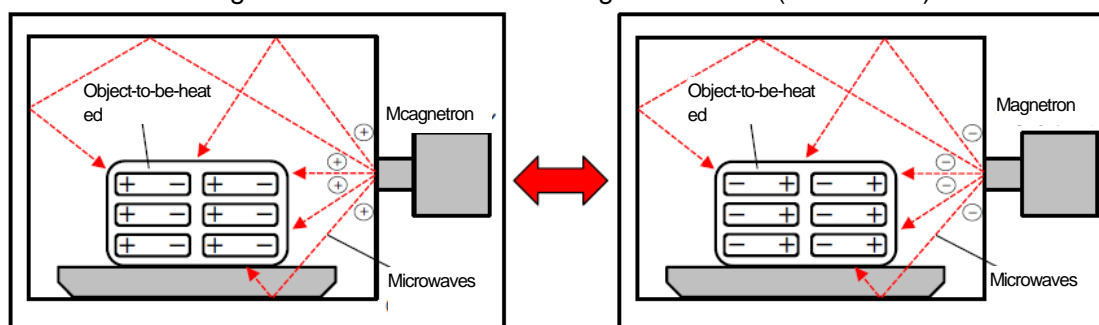
<sup>(2)</sup> "Microwave oven"-related inquiries and complaints regarding "fires," "flames and igniting," "smoke and sparks," "overheating and burning," etc. "Microwave oven" refers not only to single-function microwaves but also appliances with a microwave function, such as electric oven/microwave combinations.

### Heating principles and inside compartment construction of microwave ovens

Microwave ovens are cooking appliances that heat foods using microwaves at a frequency of  $2450 \pm 50$  MHz. The microwaves are emitted by a vacuum tube, called a magnetron, inside the microwave oven and vibrate as the positive and negative poles oscillate at a speed of 2,450 million times per second. The vibrating microwaves cause water molecules in the object-to-be-heated to vibrate, generating heat that warms the object (see Diagram 1).

In addition to microwave ovens that have inside compartments with turn tables that emit microwaves from a fixed point against the object-to-be-heated as it turns, there are also ovens without inside turntables that instead have an internal antenna beneath the bottom of the oven that spreads the microwaves as it spins (see Photograph 1 and Diagram 2).

Diagram 1. How a microwave oven generates heat (visualization)



The magnetron emits microwaves that vibrate as the poles oscillate, causing water molecules in the object-to-be-heated to vibrate

Photograph 1. Inside compartment types of microwave ovens (examples)

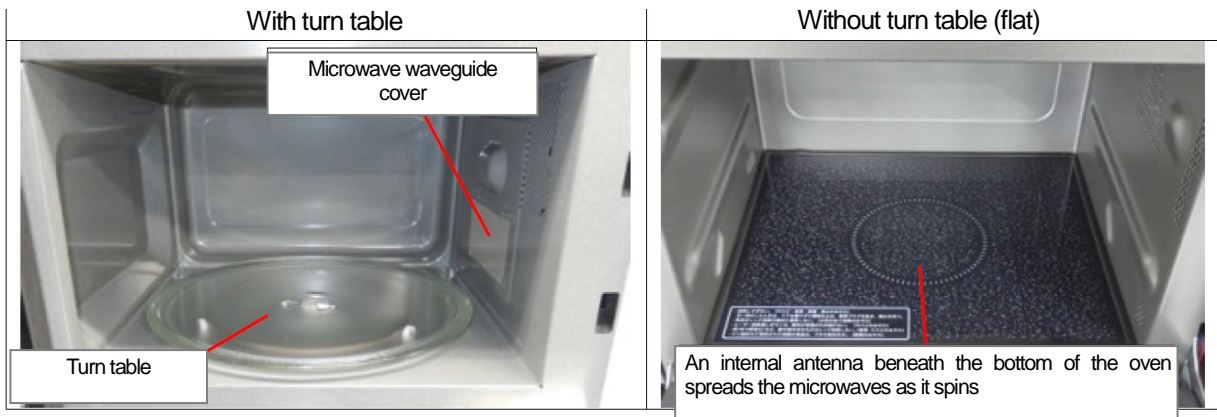
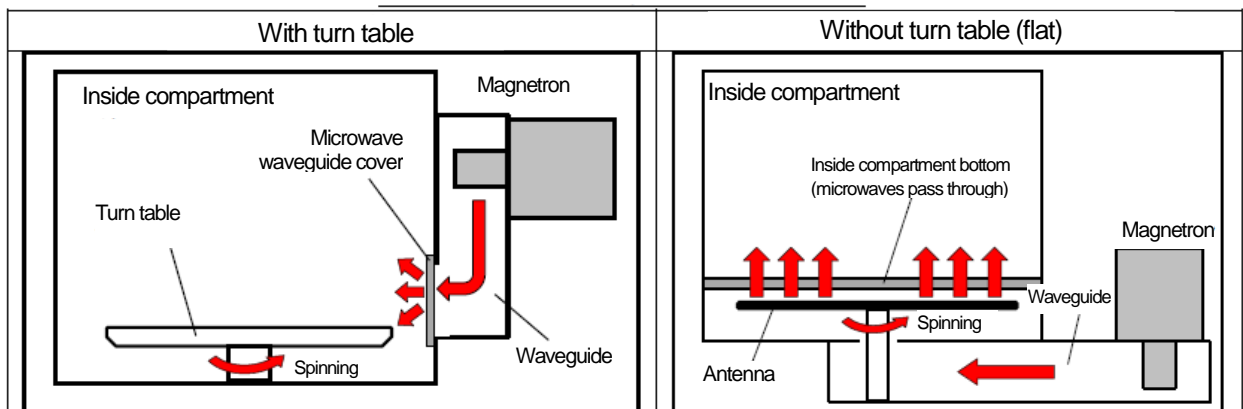


Diagram 2. Microwave oven construction (visualization)

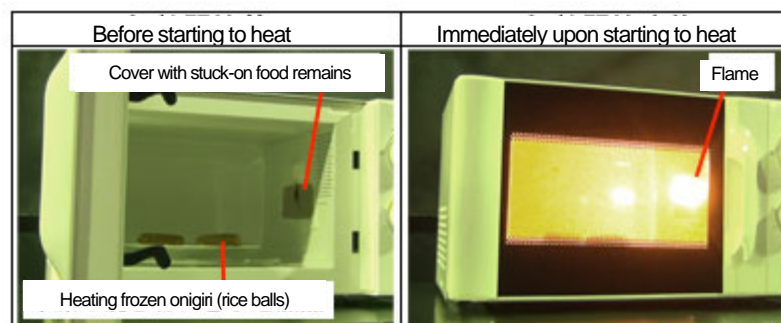


**Test Results**

(1) Examples of smoke and flames on inside compartment walls of microwave ovens

In some cases, when food remains stuck on the microwave waveguide cover were heated, the concentration of microwaves in that area produced smoke and flames.

Example tests of smoke and flames on inside compartment walls  
 \*Photographed products are not related to cases of reported accidents



- (2) Examples of smoke and flames from food inside the microwave oven  
Smoke and flames occurred when foods were overheated, creating dangerous conditions.
- (3) Warnings in operating instructions, etc.  
Operating instructions and attached documentation included warnings against using the oven when the inside compartment is dirty and to avoid overheating foods.

#### **Advice for consumers**

- Be careful to clean the inside of the oven and do not use it when dirty.
- Read the operating instructions carefully and be careful not to overheat foods.
- In the event smoke or flames occur inside the oven, stop the oven and unplug it. Leave the door closed and wait for the smoke and/or flames to subside.

## **2. Don't be too trusting! Devices that test for breath alcohol content should never be used to decide whether to drive!**

#### **Purpose**

Today devices can be bought that make it easy to test one's breath alcohol content (BrAC) by breathing into the device (below, "BrAC tester"). Local consumer centers have received inquiries and complaints from consumers questioning the recent accuracy of BrAC testers they bought around two years ago and have been using since. Tests conducted at the NCAC confirmed that the devices failed to measure BrAC, giving a BrAC reading of zero even after signaling that the measurement was done.

Over the period of slightly more than five years since April 2009, PIO-NET has received 36 inquiries and complaints<sup>(3)</sup> regarding BrAC testers (e.g. "The first month was okay, but after two or three months the level was stuck at zero" and "This morning when I used my alcohol detector to check my breath, it read zero. At work, they detected alcohol. Are consumer detectors unreliable?").

It is difficult for consumers to know whether such BrAC testers are functioning properly. Unless a malfunction or other clear problem occurs while operating the device, consumers are likely to continue using the device and trusting its results even though the device may no longer be working.

Accordingly, NCAC decided to provide consumers with information not only by testing six brands of simple BrAC testers on the market but also, for instance, by researching product labeling and advertising, as well as consumer awareness.

<sup>(3)</sup> Data registered through the last day of November 2014. The number of inquiries and complaints reflect cases specially examined for this report. Additionally, the total includes cases of devices that were purchased for business purposes and other such cases.

#### **Illustrative sample cases**

##### **Case 1:**

I bought an alcohol sensor about three months ago. My contract with the company where I work requires me to undergo an alcohol check when I get to work, and I am subject to dismissal for any violations. After working the night shift I went out drinking. Twelve hours later, since my alcohol sensor at home didn't indicate anything when I checked my alcohol level, I went to work and was checked. It indicated alcohol and I was dismissed from my job.

(man of unknown age)

##### **Case 2:**

The display on my alcohol detector would always read 0.00mg/L so I contacted the manufacturer, figuring it was broken. They told me it only works for one year from the first time it is used. They claimed it said as much in the instructions, but the font is so small it's hard to read.

(woman in her 50s)

## **Major test and research findings**

### **(1) Differences in readings based on manner of exhalation**

In some cases, even when ethanol concentrations were the same, readings varied based on how strongly air was exhaled.

### **(2) Correlation between readings and concentrations of ethanol in exhaled gas**

Higher concentrations generally produced higher readings, but the detectable range varied between brands.

### **(3) Fluctuations in readings after repeated use**

In some cases, individual units of identical brands gave different readings. Also, in some cases, there were significant fluctuations in readings after repeated use.

### **(4) Labeling**

- Every brand had packaging, etc. that carried warnings that the product should not be used to decide whether or not to drive and that the company accepted no responsibility for drunk driving resulting from the use of test results.
- In some cases, there were no warnings about the number of times a sensor could be used or about deterioration in performance, replacement, etc.
- Some brands included warnings that other substances than alcohol and environmental factors could produce inaccurate readings.

### **(5) Advertising on internet shopping websites, etc.**

- In some cases, there were no statements to the effect that the product was not meant to decide whether or not to drive, etc.
- Some sites used expressions that might lead people to imagine the product could be used to decide whether or not to drive.

### **(6) Survey of manufacturers and resellers, etc.**

- No manufacturer, reseller, etc. responded that the tested brands could be used to decide whether or not to drive after drinking.
- Some brands had no fixed number of uses or duration of use.
- Some brands were not intended to be repaired, have their sensors replaced, etc.

### **(7) Survey of users, etc.**

- Approximately 80% of respondents purchased their BrAC tester for under 10,000 yen.
- Approximately 30% of respondents revealed they use their BrAC tester to decide whether or not to drive.
- Some respondents have been using their BrAC tester for an extended period of time.
- More than 80% believed the results to be accurate and/or felt they could be used as a rough estimate.

## **Advice for Consumers**

- Never decide whether or not to drive based on the results of a breath alcohol test using a BrAC tester.
- Readings from a BrAC tester can vary based on the conditions under the measurements are taken. Do not accept their readings at face value.
- Sensors in BrAC testers have a limited lifespan. Even when a device has no visible problem and appears to be working, its sensitivity can vary; it may even no longer be able to detect alcohol. Please exercise caution using BrAC testers.

## II. Property damage

### 1. Beware scam businesses that instruct you to purchase a prepaid card!! If asked to reveal the number on a prepaid card you purchased, watch out!

Local consumer centers across Japan have received multiple reports of trouble with "scam businesses" that try to get obtain prepaid cards illegally.

As a review of recently reported trouble shows, schemes now include instructing people to purchase prepaid cards (e.g. "I received an invoice from the company and was instructed to purchase a server-based prepaid card. I did as they asked and gave them the number on the card (several digits and letters). I think I've been tricked and want them to return it"). Prepaid cards are sold widely in a variety of places so there is concern that the trouble will spread.

Giving the code (numbers, etc.) on the card to someone is tantamount to giving the entire purchased value to that person. Even if a person later realizes that a fictitious bill, etc. was used to trick them, it is extremely difficult by then to get the value back since it has already been transferred to the other person.

Accordingly, to prevent further spread of such trouble, NCAC has compiled sample cases of the most recent inquiries and complaints and is issuing this alert to consumers. Additionally, NCAC has designated March 26 through the end of May 2015 as the "Strengthening Eradication of Prepaid Card Fraud" period and will conduct consumer education in collaboration with the Japan Payment Service Association regarding this matter.



Diagram: Sales of prepaid cards (visualization)

### Sample cases of inquiries and complaints

**Case 1:** I faxed them my prepaid card number to cover the charges for a paid website.

(man in his 20s)

**Case 2:** I emailed them a picture of my prepaid card number to cover the charges for an adult website.

(man in his 40s)

**Case 3:** I gave them my prepaid card number over the phone to cover the charges for an adult website.

(man in his 50s)

**Case 4:** I emailed the business an electronic gift card to cover charges for cosmetics I bought to receive beautician services.

(woman in her 20s)



### **What these inquiries and complaints reveal about the typical features of such trouble**

- (1) Scam businesses are taking advantage of the features of prepaid cards.
- (2) It is difficult to recover damages.
- (3) The use of credit and loans may also be affected in the future.

### **Advice for consumers**

- (1) If you receive an unfamiliar invoice, etc., think before you respond or contact them.
- (2) Do not purchase prepaid cards or give out your prepaid card number, etc. because someone tells you to.
- (3) If you encounter trouble after giving out a prepaid card number, etc., immediately contact the company that issued the prepaid card.
- (4) If you have concerns or encounter trouble, consult your local consumer center or other such agency immediately.

## **2. Not like brick-and-mortar: Beware trouble with internet-based delivery cleaning services!**

Although there were more than 6000 cleaning-related inquiries and complaints again last year, the number of stores declined, as did the number of inquiries and complaints. At the same time, however, there has been an increase in inquiries and complaints regarding internet-based cleaning services. Prevalent among these are inquiries and complaints for delivery cleaning services that use a delivery company to pick up and deliver laundry (below, "online delivery type"). It is suspected that trouble arises because this type of service involves no direct consumer-business interaction, unlike brick-and-mortar cleaning services that have an actual storefront (below, "B&M type").

Accordingly, in order to prevent further trouble, NCAC decided to provide consumers with information by compiling the trends, etc. among cases of complaint.

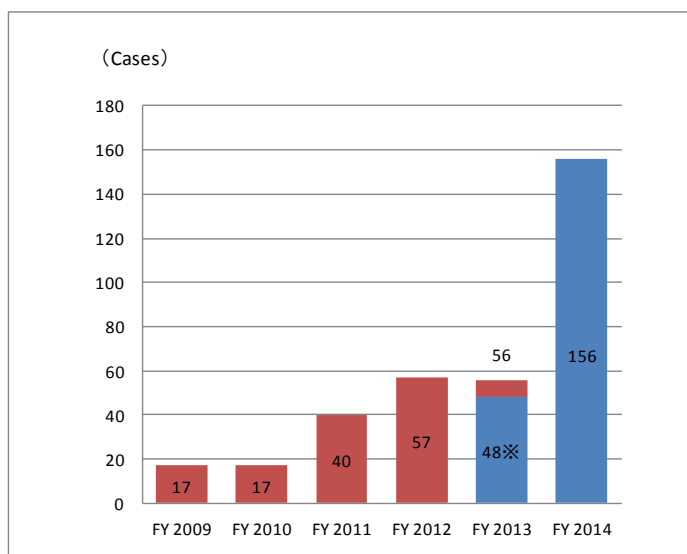
In addition, as of July 2014, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has issued a consumer protection notice to relevant departments within municipal government offices regarding inquiries and complaints such as these.<sup>(4)</sup>

- <sup>(4)</sup> A notice was issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in July 2014 to agencies responsible for the supervision of public sanitation within municipal governments instructing them to alert consumers about the need to thoroughly review service agreements with internet-based cleaning services, as there have been cases in which consumers have been unable to contact the business or in which the business has not responded adequately when trouble has arisen.

### **The number of inquiries and complaints on PIO-NET over time**

The number of inquiries and complaints related to cleaning services has been falling year by year. At the same time, however, the number of internet sales-related inquiries and complaints has grown from a mere 17 cases in FY2009 to nine times that—156 cases—in FY2014. Moreover, the number this year is nearly three times that of last year.

Diagram: Number of internet sales-related cleaning service inquiries and complaints<sup>(5)</sup>



\*Number of cases for the same period last year (Data registered through January 31, 2015)

<sup>(5)</sup> Totals here reflect the number of internet-based sales out of all mail order sales. "Internet sales-related inquiries and complaints" includes cases such as "I saw it on the internet and made a request."

#### **Sample cases of inquiries and complaints**

**Case 1:** I sent laundry to delivery cleaning-and-storage service. I was moving so I contacted them about the change to my delivery address, but they told me they never received it. When the business later checked again, it turned out they had lost it. They failed to contact me and their service was poor.  
(woman in her 30s)

**Case 2:** I requested cleaning for what I thought was a one-piece dress. They decided it was a party dress and charged me more than five times the amount. When I asked to cancel, they wouldn't consent.  
(woman in her 40s)

**Case 3:** I had been told I would get my garment back in two to three weeks. When it didn't arrive I contacted them and was told it would take a half year, so I requested expedited service. When I got my down jacket back the dirt on the sleeve was still there. I complained but they wouldn't listen.  
(woman of unknown age)

**Case 4:** After accidentally dry cleaning an item that should not have been dry cleaned, they told me their company's terms limit compensation to a maximum 10,000 yen.  
(man in his 30s)

**Case 5:** When I contacted them about a lost item, a recording told me to contact them via the internet. And so I did, but never got any response.  
(woman in her 50s)

#### **Issues revealed by these inquiries and complaints**

(1) Inadequate confirmation

With B&M-type cleaners, delivery and receipt of clothes between the consumer and cleaning business occur at the same time. By contrast, with online delivery-type cleaners, an inadequate confirmation system on the part of the



business has led to trouble with lost items. Inquiries and complaints also included cases, for instance, in which a portion of the clothes sent to be cleaned were not returned.

## (2) Faceless negotiation is difficult

While some business do have set pricing (i.e. "X yen per number of items," "X yen per bag") regardless of the type of garment, most determine the type, price, etc. of the garment themselves when they inspect it and canceling is difficult, according to the inquiries and complaints received.

When there is a physical store and a garments is still dirty even after being cleaned, the consumer can go to the store, show the item to the business, and negotiate the matter. In the case of online delivery-type cleaners, however, the business is often located far away, making it difficult for a consumer to go there directly and negotiate.

## (3) Other

How businesses handle cleaning accidents (e.g. damaged or lost items) based on their own standards of compensation has also been a noticeable source of trouble.<sup>(6)</sup>

In addition, consumers that try to contact such businesses are told to "contact them by email" or discover "later on, the business can't be reached," according to inquiries and complaints that have been received. Such cases show there are issues with how business responds to consumer complaints.

<sup>(6)</sup> Cleaners that carry the S Mark or LD Mark adhere to specific cleaning accident compensation standards in the event items in their care are damaged. The S Mark represents a "Standard Business Agreement" approved by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare that takes its name from first letter of its three requirements: Standards, Safety, and Sanitation. Businesses displaying the S Mark have applied to the prefectural government and are registered with the Environmental Health Industry Guidance Center in the Japanese prefecture in which they operate. The LD Mark, which takes its name from the first letters of laundry and drycleaning, is displayed at cleaners belonging to the Laundry & Drycleaning Association in each of Japan's 47 prefectures as part of the All Japan Laundry & Drycleaning Association. The mark can be found on the All Japan Laundry & Drycleaning Association's website.  
<http://www.zenkuren.or.jp/user.php?itemid=8>

### **Advice for consumers**

- (1) Consumers should be aware of the differences between B&M-type and online delivery-type cleaners before deciding whether or not to use the latter.
- (2) When using them, consumer should thoroughly review the service agreement, contact information for the business, its compensation standards, and so on.
- (3) Be specific about cleaning methods and spots to be cleaned and share that information with the business as much as possible.

## **III. Other**

### **1. Results and summary of the "Survey Regarding the Handling, Etc. of Cross-border Consumer Transaction Inquiries and Complaints" given to consumer inquiries staff**

To better understand issues involved in cases of consumer trouble related to cross-border consumer transactions (transactions between consumers in Japan and businesses located overseas), including approaches to resolving

them, the National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan conducted a questionnaire survey of consumer inquiries staff working at local consumer centers across Japan.

### **Survey results: Key points**

1. Approximately 90% of consumer inquiries staff have fielded inquiries and complaints regarding cross-border consumer transactions.<sup>(7)</sup>
2. In handling inquiries and complaints regarding cross-border consumer transactions, approximately 50% of staff members indicated they both "contact the affiliated domestic business" and "give detailed advice to persons making inquiries."
3. Among staff members who contacted affiliated business, etc. in Japan, 80% contacted "credit card companies."
4. The approximately 90% of staff members who have experience taking inquiries and complaints regarding cross-border consumer transactions, indicated feeling that such cases were more difficult to resolve than those related to domestic transactions.
5. In handling inquiries and complaints regarding cross-border consumer transactions, approximately 80% of staff members said they had referred the person making the inquiry to CCJ.<sup>(8)</sup>
6. In terms of their expectations of governmental agencies, approximately 80% of staff members indicated a desire for "more information and better advice."

<sup>(7)</sup> Refers to inquiries and complaints regarding three categories of transaction included in the survey: "online transactions on foreign websites," "local transactions while residing overseas," and "transactions with foreign businesses conducted through a domestic Japanese business."

<sup>(8)</sup> Until March 31, 2014, inquiries and complaints were fielded by the Cross-Border Consumer Center Japan (CCJ) at the Consumer Affairs Agency. From FY2015, these operations have been assumed by the National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan and such inquiries and complaints will soon be fielded by its Cross-Border Consumer Center Japan (CCJ).