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# Dan Haar: Lawsuits test Pam cooking spray safety claims

By [Dan Haar](#)

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Photo: Dan Haar / Hearst Connecticut Media

## **IMAGE 1 OF 3**

Guillermina Coello, shown in the office of her lawyer, J. Craig Smith of Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder, was cooking at home in West Haven when a can of Pam cooking spray exploded and sent her to the Bridgeport ... [more](#)

The moment that changed Guillermina Coello's life could not have come at a more mundane time and place.

Coello was at home, stirring beans and preparing to chop onions in her kitchen on the second floor of a house in West Haven on Oct. 16, 2014, a Thursday, just before 6 p.m. She had picked up her two sons, ages 8 and 11, from school. They were in other rooms.

She sent her boyfriend out of the kitchen, preferring to cook alone.

She had added oil to the pot from a can of Pam cooking spray, and set the can down. “The can of Pam was over here, far away,” she said in an interview through an interpreter, waving her left hand — the uninjured one.

Then, in a flash, mayhem.

“The can exploded. ... It burst in flames, I was screaming, there were flames everywhere on the counter, on my clothes, all over me,” Coello recalled. “I had a dress on, I took it off.”

She doesn’t recall much beyond that. Her boyfriend called 911, her sons rushed in, a neighbor came in from next door and the fire department and ambulance arrived.

Coello was transferred to the Bridgeport Hospital burn unit, where she stayed for a month with — according to a lawsuit against the maker of Pam — “first-, second- and third-degree burns to her face, chest, right arm, right hand, right leg and right foot.”

She needed skin grafts, rebuilding of some of her knuckles and extensive therapy, and had to return to the hospital with infections. She could not work for nine months and even now, nearly four years later, working as a driver for Lyft and Uber, she’s not at full strength and remains scarred physically and, she says, emotionally.

Coello, 46, is seeking at least \$12 million from Conagra Brands Inc. in a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Bridgeport, through the law firm Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder of Bridgeport. (A different firm brought the suit originally).

It’s one of the first cases in the nation charging Conagra with civil violations of faulty product design and failure to warn users of dangers, according to a search of court records and her lawyer, J. Craig Smith, a partner at the Koskoff firm.

The firm also represents plaintiffs in a parallel Connecticut case stemming from a 2013 incident involving two Yale students cooking at a house in Washington, Conn.

At a time of debate about product liability amid loosening of government oversight, the Pam cases are testing a sensitive border between proper use and misuse, adequate and inadequate labeling and safe and unsafe product design.

Coello, who also has an older daughter in her 20s, moved to Connecticut 15 years ago from Ecuador, where she worked for two affiliated import and export companies — including modeling at trade shows for seafood and electronics.

“Guillermina Coello’s ability to carry on and enjoy life’s activities has been impaired,” the lawsuit says, and Coello tearfully bears that out. She instinctively hides her right hand and arm as we speak, and as I take a picture of her, and said she can’t enjoy normal summertime activities like going to the beach.

“I would do anything to be the way I was before,” she said.

The question is whether Conagra is at fault for a Pam container that was, according to Smith, redesigned a few years ago in a way that might have contributed to the accident. The lawsuits claim Conagra knew about the dangers of bursting or venting cans even when the cans were used properly.

Conagra, based in Chicago, then known as ConAgra Foods Inc. and based in Omaha, Neb., denies wrongdoing in an answer to the 2015 lawsuit complaint and in a statement issued this past week.

“Conagra expressly denies that the Pam aerosol canister was in a defective condition due to any act of omission, design or practice of Conagra,” the company said in the lawsuit.

The company said Coello and the other defendants failed to heed warnings on the can, which say the contents are flammable and must be kept away from a stove top or oven.

“The accident in question resulted from the misuse, abuse and/or failure to properly maintain the Pam cooking spray and the Pam cooking spray canister,” the company said in the lawsuit.

And in an emailed statement, Conagra spokesman Dan Hare said, “Pam Cooking Sprays have been used safely by millions of Americans for more than 50 years for baking, grilling and cooking. This stands as a testament to both the effectiveness of the product and its safety with proper use. Conagra is sympathetic to the claims being made in the litigation, but Pam Cooking Spray is a product that has stood the test of time. We feel that it is being wrongly accused.”

Three and a half years after the Coello case was first filed, the parties agreed last month to a schedule in which lawyers on both sides will take expert opinions and depositions through this fall.

One issue is the design of the can. Aerosol sprays necessarily have a propellant, and are pressurized — making them subject to bulging, bursting or exploding. The question is when and under what circumstances.

In order to reduce the risk of outright explosion, Conagra or a vendor company designed a pressurized tab on the bottom of some larger cans of Pam. The tab can open when pressure or temperature rises, sending the product out of the can rapidly as a safety valve.

That can send the cooking oil, which is flammable, gushing across gas stove flames.

“It’s burned down a number of kitchens but it’s also burning people,” Smith said. “They just didn’t think it through. It seems like a really dumb move to put cooking spray into cans that can vent.”

Under court rules, Smith is barred from sharing much of the information the company provides about how it adheres to regulations — including with plaintiffs in similar cases across the country. That ban, designed to protect trade secrets, also makes it harder for

plaintiffs to bring lawsuits. It was the subject of one set of motions these last three years, along with Conagra's motion to dismiss the cases, which Judge Stefan Underhill rejected.

Accidents involving Pam have not led to recalls and in some instances, the users clearly have left the can too close to a stove.

New York model Alexandria Morgan lived through a scare when she was cooking and shooting video for a YouTube segment. She had left a can of Pam between the burners. It burst loudly. "I want to get on my hands and knees and thank God that I didn't get hurt," she said immediately afterward, still shaken. "Let this be a lesson. Pay attention when you're cooking."

Coello and the other Connecticut victims did use care and kept the cans at a reasonable distance, the lawsuits claim. "I don't feel complete," Coello said. "I went to a place where I didn't want anyone to visit me."