

Returning Home After a Fire Take Precautions. Be Safe. Protect Your Health.

Ash Clean-up in Areas Without Fire Damage

Ash, soot, dust, and other airborne particles may have been deposited inside and outside of homes and businesses. While ash from wildfires is relatively non-toxic and like ash that may be found in a home fireplace, it may be irritating to the skin, eyes, nose and throat. Exposure to ash in air may trigger asthmatic attacks in people who already have asthma. Ash, dust and debris (particularly from burned buildings) may contain toxic and cancer-causing chemicals, including asbestos, arsenic, and lead.

- **Do not let children play in or with items covered by the ash.**
- **During clean-up, wear household dishwashing gloves, long-sleeved shirt and long pants** to avoid skin contact. If you do get ash on your skin, wash it off with warm water and soap as soon as possible.
- If handling, broken material (i.e., glass, metals, wood, masonry, etc.) wear gloves that protect against cuts, abrasions and punctures (i.e., leather or Kevlar gloves).
- A disposable mask with a rating of N-95 or better, which can be purchased from a home/hardware store, can be worn during clean-up to avoid breathing in ash and other airborne particles. They do not protect from gases. **N-95 masks must be properly fitted**, with no gaps around the edges, for protection. An improperly fitted mask is the same as wearing no mask at all. Follow label instructions on package for proper use. N-95 masks may make it harder to breath, especially for those with lung or heart disease. (People who must be outside for extended periods of time in an ash-covered area may benefit from using a tight-fitting N95 respirator or greater to reduce their exposure).
- Avoid getting ash into the air as much as possible. **Do not use leaf blowers** or take other actions that will put ash into the air. **Gentle sweeping** of indoor and outdoor surfaces, **followed by wet mopping**, is the best way to clean an area with ash. A solution of bleach and water may be used to disinfect an area, if desired. Read label on container for proper use.
- Wear safety goggles (not safety glasses) if it is anticipated that clean-up activities will cause ash to be released into the air; and if using chemical cleaning solutions, to prevent splash into the eyes.
- Wear safety shoes or sturdy close-toed, high-ankle leather shoes if burn debris (i.e., broken glass, metal, wood, etc.) is in the area that is being cleaned.
- **Shop vacuums and regular household vacuum cleaners are not recommended** to clean up ash. These vacuums do not filter out small particles, but instead blow such particles into the air where they can be breathed. However, HEPA-filter vacuums can filter out small particles and can be used.
- Collected ash may be disposed of in the regular trash by **placing it in a plastic trash bag first** to prevent the ash from becoming airborne and blowing away as the trash can is later emptied.
- Shower regularly throughout the day when cleaning in and out of areas with ash.

Water Safety After a Fire

Boil water notices may be in place due to fire response efforts. Check with your local water district for an update if you are impacted by a fire.

Customers within the affected areas are advised to either use **bottled water** or **boil tap water for one minute** prior to its use for drinking, brushing teeth, cooking and cleaning indoor surfaces, such as countertops, stove tops, tables and sinks. Boiling the water kills bacteria and other organisms that may have been introduced to

the system. If power (gas or electric) is unavailable, residents should use bottled water, **or you can add eight drops of household bleach to one gallon of tap water** and let it sit for 30 minutes. If your water looks cloudy or dirty, you should not drink it. Upon return of normal water service, you should flush the hot and cold-water lines until the water appears clear and the water quality returns to normal.

Food Safety After a Power Outage

The safety of food may be a problem following a power outage for an extended period. You may have experienced a power outage or could find that your kitchen has ash, soot, dust, and other airborne particles. Follow these recommendations to avoid foodborne illness:

- Any food or drink products with an off odor or signs of spoilage should be thrown out. Best practice is: **“When in doubt, throw it out.”**
- Generally, food in the refrigerator is safe if the power was out for no more than 4 hours and the refrigerator door was kept shut. Food can be held in the fridge for a few hours if, while the power is out, the doors to the fridge and freezer are kept closed to maintain coldest possible temperatures.
- If a power outage lasts more than four hours or the refrigerator door was not kept shut, it is best to **throw away perishable food items** such as meat, dairy products and eggs.
- Items that have thawed in the freezer should be thrown away. **Do not re-freeze thawed food.** All other food items should be inspected to ensure safety.
- Plastic bottles of liquid, such as water, that have been covered with ash should be discarded. It is not enough to rinse off the bottle as these particles contaminate the caps, making them very difficult to decontaminate.
- Food that has not been stored in waterproof or airtight containers and has been covered with ash should be discarded. This includes products that have been stored in cardboard or other soft packaging.
- Food stored in sealed, previously unopened glass or metal cans or jars, such as baby food, should be safe for use. Clean before opening and transfer the contents to another container before eating.
- **Dispose of food in trash bags** and seal tightly before placing in the trash bin. Double bagging is recommended to prevent fly breeding.

Wildlife After a Fire

Wildlife displaced by wildfire activity may enter your property or home. Places where there is an accumulation of trash or debris can attract wild animals.

- **Keep garbage in rodent-proof containers that are tightly covered to avoid attracting animals.**
- **Do not leave pet food outdoors.**
- Check for areas where rats and wild animals can sleep, hide, or find food, and seal these areas if possible.
- Protect yourself by wearing gloves and a mask when cleaning these areas. Wash your hands when you're finished.

For More Information

- **Call the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health at (888) 700-9995.**