

Clean-Up After a Fire – Frequently Asked Questions

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ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH



The Los Angeles County, Department of Public Health, Environmental Health Division, is here to provide guidance and support as you recover after a fire. Please note. Even after a fire is out, hazards may persist, and precautions should be taken for the health and safety of you, your family, and your community. Below are frequently asked questions and answers to help guide you in your clean-up efforts.

1. What should I wear when returning to inspect and clean-up my property in an impacted area?

Wear proper protective equipment, highly recommended, including:

- N95 or P100 respirator mask: Filters out harmful particles from the fires from the air you breath.
- Gloves: Protect hands from cuts and harmful ash, dust, dirt, and chemicals during inspection and clean-up.
- Long-sleeved shirt and long pants: Shield arms and legs from ash, dust, dirt, sharp objects, and other potential hazards.
- Sturdy closed-toe shoes: Keep feet safe from debris, sharp objects, and other potential hazards.
- Safety Goggles: Protect eyes from harmful ash, dust, and dirt that may be stirred up during inspection and clean-up.

2. Can I wear a wet cloth over my nose and mouth instead of a respirator mask while I clean up?

Wearing a wet cloth, instead of a respirator mask, is not recommended. A wet cloth is not as effective as a respirator mask. While it can block larger particles, it won't protect against fine particles resulting from smoke and stirred up ash. Use a properly fitted N-95 or P-100 respirator mask with no gaps around the edges for better protection.

3. I washed my clothes, but they still smell of smoke. Is it safe to wear them?

Clothes with lingering smoke odor can be irritating and harmful, especially to those with heart and lung issues. Rewash clothes with strong detergent or specialized odor removers. Before washing your clothes and while wearing proper protective equipment outside, gently shake off any soot and ash into a trash bag to prevent them from becoming airborne. Double bag and tie the trash bag to help prevent soot and ash from blowing away when the trash can is emptied.

4. How dangerous is it to be in my house if there is ash/smoke inside from cracks in the windows and doors (many houses are old and not well-sealed)?

Homes with Ash/Smoke Odor Inside. Even if your house wasn't directly damaged, being in a house with ash, soot, and smoke can pose health risks, especially for individuals with respiratory issues, children, and the elderly. The dangers come from tiny particles and toxic substances that can linger in the air and on surfaces. Below are key recommendations to reduce those risks:

- a. **Ventilate the Air Inside:** Open windows and doors to air out indoor spaces when you first return, but only when the outdoor air quality has improved. If there is a lot of ash and debris outside your home, consider airing out your home after debris has been cleaned up, and filter the indoor air (see below) in the meantime.
- b. **Filter the Air:**
 - Use portable air purifiers/cleaners with HEPA and, preferably, charcoal filters to help filter out smoke particles and improve indoor air quality.

- If you have a central HVAC system, consider cleaning your HVAC ducts. Change the HVAC filter to a high-efficiency HVAC filter to increase filtration, choose one with a MERV 13 rating, or as high a rating as your system fan and filter slot can accommodate. Run the system's fan on recirculation mode as often as possible to trap fine particles. Replace filters as they become clogged or monthly for up to a year after the surrounding area is cleaned.
- c. **Clean thoroughly:** Wear proper protective equipment as described above. The following is recommended to prevent stirring up harmful ash and particles.
 1. **Sweep:** Gently sweep surfaces, and gently place the material into plastic trash bags to avoid scattering it further. Tie the trash bag, preferably double bag, to help prevent the contents from being released into air when the trash can is being emptied.
 2. **Vacuum:** Use HEPA-filter vacuuming to filter out small particles on surfaces.
 3. **Mop:** Follow gentle sweeping with wet mopping to remove harmful ash, soot, and dust from surfaces.
 4. **Wipe:** Wet wipe to effectively remove remaining ash, dust, and soot from hard surfaces such as windowsills, countertops, and non-pours furniture.
 5. **Wash or dispose:** Wash or dispose of porous items like linens and carpets.
 6. **Disinfect (Optional):** If desired, use a bleach and water solution to disinfect the area.
 7. **Important:** *Always read the label on the bleach container for proper dilution ratios and safety instructions*
 - d. **Reduce the Risk of Outdoor Ash, Dust, or Smoke Entering the Home:** Ensure all windows and doors are closed to reduce the risk of outdoor ash, dust or smoke entering the home. Use painter's tape, duct tape, rags, or cloths to seal any gaps around doors and windows to reduce smoke infiltration.
 - e. **Wash hands and toys frequently:** To reduce hand-to-mouth transfer of soot contaminated dust or soil, wash your children's hands after outdoor play, before eating and at bedtime. Wash their toys regularly.
 - f. **Prevent children from playing outdoors:** Do not allow outdoor play until the grounds have been cleaned.
 - g. **Reduce soot transfer to your home:** Take off shoes before entering your home. Consider placing "sticky mats" at each entrance to capture dust, dirt, and fine particles from the soles of shoes.
 - h. **Avoid extended time outside for pets:** Limit outdoor time and keep them clean. Pets may transfer soot from outside into the home.
 - i. **Remove and wash cloths:** Remove the clothing you wear during the cleanup and before entering the home after working outdoors. Place them in a sealed plastic bag to be washed separately.
 - j. **Shower if Necessary:** Showering can help remove any particles from their skin and hair.
 - k. **Monitor Your Health:** Watch for symptoms like coughing, difficulty breathing, headaches, unusual fatigue, eye and throat irritation, runny nose or sinus irritation, or chest pain. Seek medical attention if symptoms persist or worsen, especially if you have pre-existing conditions, consult a healthcare provider. For any life-threatening concerns, call 911.

5. What do the various orders mean around water contamination and what should I do if I bathed in water that I now realize I was not supposed to use?

Water Notices/Advisories. Check with your local water department to see if a Common Water Contamination Order, Notice, or Advisory was issued for your area. Always follow the instructions issued by your local department to minimize health risks. Here are the main types of orders:

1. **Boil Water Notice:** Water may be contaminated with pathogens (i.e., bacteria, viruses, and parasites). Boil water to kill harmful bacteria, viruses, or parasites before drinking, cooking, or brushing teeth. Be cautious when bathing babies and young children. Consider using boiled (and cooled) or bottled water for bathing them or giving them a sponge bath to reduce the chance of them swallowing water.

2. **Do Not Drink Notice:** Water may contain chemicals, heavy metals, or other contaminants. Boiling won't make it safe for drinking, cooking, or brushing teeth. Bathing may still be allowed unless specified otherwise.
3. **Do Not Boil Notice:** Water contains chemicals or toxins that could harm the skin and you when boiling.
4. **Do Not Use Order:** Water is not safe for any use, including drinking, cooking, bathing, or washing. This is the most severe restriction.

If you bathed in water under a "Do Not Use" or "Do Not Drink" advisory, rinse with bottled or confirmed safe water immediately and monitor your health. For chemical contamination, contact your healthcare provider or poison control for guidance.

6. When should I call my doctor if I experience irritation with clean-up activities?

Not Feeling Well during Clean-up. Stop cleaning immediately and contact your healthcare provider if you experience persistent irritation, difficulty breathing, or other severe or life-threatening symptoms such as dizziness, severe difficulty breathing, persistent chest pain, among many others.

7. Is it safe for children to return home after orders are lifted if there is still ash/debris outdoors?

Children Returning Home. If there is still ash or debris outdoors, it is advised to keep children away from all outdoor areas until thorough cleaning is done. Their respiratory systems are more sensitive to exposure to ash and soot can be harmful. To improve and protect indoor air quality:

a. Filter the Air:

- Use portable air purifiers/cleaners with HEPA and, preferably, charcoal filters to help filter out smoke particles and improve indoor air quality.
- If you have a central HVAC system, consider cleaning your HVAC ducts. Change the HVAC filter to a high-efficiency HVAC filter to increase filtration, choose one with a MERV 13 rating, or as high a rating as your system fan and filter slot can accommodate. Run the system's fan on recirculation mode as often as possible to trap fine particles. Replace filters as they become clogged or monthly for up to a year after the surrounding area is cleaned.

b. **Reduce the Risk of Outdoor Ash, Dust, or Smoke Entering the Home:** Ensure all windows and doors are closed to reduce the risk of outdoor ash, dust or smoke entering the home.

c. **Seal Gaps:** Use painter's tape, duct tape, rags, or cloths to seal any gaps around doors and windows to reduce smoke infiltration.

8. How should I clean my yard or patio that are filled with debris, knowing that water should be conserved?

Cleaning Your Yard. Always use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as gloves, disposable N-95 masks that are properly fitted with no gaps around the edges, safety goggles, gloves, sturdy close-toed shoes, and long-sleeved shirts and pants. To clean your yard or patio while conserving water, use the following cleaning practices:

- a. **Gentle Sweeping:** Start by gently sweeping outdoor surfaces and gently placing the contents into plastic trash bags to avoid scattering it further. Tie the trash bag, preferably double bag, to avoid scattering it further or being released into air when the trash can is being emptied.
- b. **Wet Mopping:** Follow-up with wet mopping to remove remaining harmful ash, soot, and dust from surfaces.
- c. **Disinfection (Optional):** If desired, use a bleach and water solution to disinfect the area.

Important: Always read the label on the bleach container for proper dilution ratios and safety instructions.

IMPORTANT: DO NOT USE LEAF BLOWERS TO AVOID SCATTERING HARMFUL ASH AND FIRE DEBRIS INTO THE AIR.

For more information and details, please refer to Los Angeles County, Department of Public Health, Environmental Health Division website: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/safety/returning-home-after-fire.htm>