

## Returning Home After a Wildfire - Restore Your Home Frequently Asked Questions

- After a wildfire, your home may be affected by smoke, soot and ash, chemicals, structural damage, and water damage.
- This information is a collection of health and safety items to think about as you return to your home.
- It covers many general topics. Not all of the information may apply to your situation.

### What items will I need to throw out when I return home?

- Heat, smoke, ash, and the chemicals used to fight the fire can damage things in your home
- You may need to throw these items out:
  - Food
  - Medicines
  - Cleaning products
  - Make-up
  - Personal care products (soap, shampoo, toothpaste, lotion, etc)
- You may need to throw out items that are not listed on this page.

Before getting rid of any items, make sure that you make a list of all items as part of your fire insurance claim. Take photos of items you throw out.

### How do I handle food that was in my home during the wildfire?

- Throw away food stored in your refrigerator, cooler, or freezer if the temperature inside was warmer than 4°C **at any time**.
- Most fridges can keep food cold enough for about 4 hours without power.
- Throw away raw vegetables or fruits that were not in your fridge.

Check the rest of the food in your home, including cans and dry goods like flour, sugar, and spices, and **throw it out** if it:

- has spoiled, even if your fridge stayed cold at all times
- was open
- got damaged by fire or smoke, even if the package isn't open
- was stored in containers with tiny holes (porous) like cardboard or foam containers
- is in a can that is bulging, rusted, or dented
- was stored in a glass jar (the heat from the fire likely compromised the safety seal)

Clean and disinfect all cans before opening them to make sure you don't contaminate the food.

Be safe when checking your food. If you are in doubt, throw it out.



### **How do I replace or clean my fridge and freezer?**

- Contact your insurance company to see if you need to replace your fridge or freezer and if you have coverage for this.
- Follow your local guidelines for what to do with your old fridge and freezer if you need to dispose of them.
- Your fridge or freezer may have gone without power for some time and may smell.

If you are keeping your fridge or freezer, clean and disinfect after you have thrown out the food. them. To do this:

1. Unplug the fridge and freezer.
2. Rinse or blow out (with an air hose) the coils and compressors on the fridge and freezer.
3. To clean the inside, use soap and water and then rinse with clean water.
4. After cleaning, sanitize the inside with a bleach and water mixture. Mix 1/2 teaspoon (2 mL) of household bleach for every 4 cups (1 L) of water.
5. Leave the doors of the fridge and freezer open and let them dry out.
6. Once the fridge and freezer are dry, reconnect the power.
7. Wait until the inside temperature of your fridge has reached 4°C (cold) before refilling it with food.
8. Wait until your freezer is cold enough to freeze food before refilling it with food.

### **What should I do with medicines and personal care products that were left in my home?**

- Throw out medicines, make-up, and personal care products like soap, shampoo, and toothpaste that were exposed to smoke or high temperatures, even if the package isn't opened.
- Follow your local guidelines on where chemicals can be dropped off for disposal.
- Do not flush any medicines down the toilet or sink.
  - o Bring any medicines that need to be thrown out back to a pharmacy.

### **How do I clean up smoke damage, ash, and soot?**

If you will be doing the cleaning, wear the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) including masks (N95 masks are best for this task), gloves, and boots.

Follow your local guidelines to find out how to dispose of hazardous materials including ash.

Follow the tips below to clean smoke damage and soot from different parts of your home.

## Outside of your home

- Use a hose, sprayer, or pressure washer on the outside of your home, walkway, vehicle, deck, and any outdoor furniture.
  - Rinse off your air intake vents carefully.
  - Do not use air hoses to clean exterior surfaces because you could blow more ash and soot into your house.
  - Before rinsing the exterior of your home, contact the Band to make sure there are no water or sewage restrictions.
  
- If you're in a small or poorly ventilated space, be careful when using pumps, pressure washers, or generators.
  - You are at risk for carbon monoxide poisoning if there isn't enough air flow.
  - Keep doors and windows open.
  
- If you have a private septic system, check the area around your system for damage or sewage leaks.
  - Notify the Band if you find damage to your septic system.

## Air circulation

Get the air moving inside your house by using a fan and opening your windows. Only do this if there's no smoke or air quality advisory for your area.

To help with clean air circulation in your home, you can also:

- Replace your furnace filter. You may need to do this more often than usual due to construction and cleaning activities in your home or neighbourhood. Check your filter often.
- Use HEPA furnace filters. They may help take away the smoky smell from your home. HEPA stands for high-efficiency particulate air.
- Maintain your humidifier, if you have one. Humidifiers that are properly looked after can help lower how much ash is floating around.
- Have your ducts and air conditioning system cleaned by a professional.
- Do not use ozone generators. They don't act as "air cleaners" and may pose safety hazards.

Demolition activities (tearing down buildings) are more likely to cause ash to float in the air. When these activities are happening:

- Stay indoors.
- Close all outer doors and windows.
- Turn off the ventilation for air conditioners and furnaces as much as possible.

## Inside of your home

- Wash all surfaces inside your home with mild detergent (mix of soap and water) or an appropriate cleaning solution and rinse thoroughly.
  - Clean any place where there's ash, dust, or the smell of fire. Wash the inside of closets, cupboards, and drawers.
- Wash the inside of your windows thoroughly.

- Use a wet cloth or wet mop. This is safer and better than dry or dust mopping, which can move ash and debris around your house. Change the water if it gets dirty.
- Only vacuum with a unit that has a HEPA filter that can catch ash particles. Using unfiltered vacuums will just move the ash around your house. Change your HEPA filter often.
- Wash and clean all ash-contaminated household items with mild detergent. Change the water often.
- Try to clean as much ash and dust as possible. Ash that isn't cleaned up is broken into smaller particles and becomes harder to remove from carpets and surfaces.
- Attic insulation can keep smoke odours, so you may want to replace it.

### **Fabric, carpets, and clothing**

- Remove soot before you try to clean or deodorize carpets, curtains, and soft furniture like your couch. Soot is oily and can stain these items.
- Steam clean carpets, drapes, curtains, and furniture. Change the water often.
- Wash or dry clean all of your clothing and household linens that have been affected by the fire. You may have to run many rinse cycles to get out all the ash, soot, and smoke. Consider doing this laundry outside of your house. Use a machine tagged for heavy contaminants at a laundromat. These are usually marked as "oilers."

### **Electronics**

- Before using electronics after a wildfire, it is recommended that you take all electronic equipment outside and "blow out" the components with an air hose.
- Ash can cause static charges. Do not blow out components inside your home.
- Get any electronics checked by a qualified technician before using them again.

### **What should I do if my yard and outdoor play areas are impacted by fire ash and soot?**

If you decide to clean your yard and surrounding areas yourself, wear the appropriate PPE including masks (N95 masks are best for this task), gloves, and boots and follow these steps:

- Wet down any fire debris. **Do not** wash the fire debris into the street.
- Scrape up fire ash and soot from your property as much as possible. Place it in plastic bags or other containers that will keep it from being spread around and take it to a landfill. If your home or property was totally destroyed by fire, then the restoration company will look after this for you when they begin the demolition and recovery process.
- For children's play areas and equipment, clear away any debris and remove puddles and standing water.
- If there is fire or structural damage to play equipment, block access to the area until the equipment is repaired or replaced.
- Use mild detergent (soap and water) and clean water to wash children's outside toys, play equipment, and sports equipment.
- Sand, gravel, or other loose materials placed under playground equipment should be removed and replaced, especially if you can see ash, soot, and small debris.
- If you suspect or know that a sandbox was impacted by fire or fire retardants (fire fighting materials), replace the sand.

## How do I clean up my lawn, gardens, trees, and plants?

- Rinse fire retardant off trees, shrubs, and plants if possible.
- Soak up any puddles or standing water that has fire retardant materials with soil or sand.
- Regularly wet down your garden and lawn until the smoke and ash have been diluted or reabsorbed into the air. Ash and soot on plants will continue to smell smoky for some time.
- If you choose to fix or put in new lawns, you can re-sod or reseed grassy areas.
- Consider adding new, clean soil to gardens if you suspect or know the area was damaged by the fire.
- Don't eat fruits and vegetables that were growing in your garden during the fire.
- Compost from bins that were closed during the fire can be kept and added into your soil as usual.
  - Do not use compost from bins that were open during the fire.

## How do I clean up fire retardant?

Some fire retardants can make people and pets sick if swallowed. Fire retardants can also irritate your eyes, cause dry skin, and cause stinging to cuts and scrapes on your skin. See your doctor or call Health Link at 811 as soon as possible if you have any reaction to these products.

If your home was sprayed with fire retardant or the wind blew some onto your house, it should be removed.

- Your house's siding, your roof, and your vehicles should be cleaned.
- Clean retardant from any outside toys, furniture, or tools.
- A fire restoration contractor will be able to help you with this.

If you decide to clean fire retardant yourself:

- **Never use bleach when cleaning fire retardant.** The reaction between bleach and the fire retardants will produce harmful and explosive gases.
- Use appropriate PPE such as masks, rubber gloves, rubber boots, long sleeved shirt, and pants.
- Wash your home's roof and siding, your vehicles, and outdoor patio furniture with clean water.
- To clean windows and glass, use clean water. A razor blade tool can help to remove sticky residue.
- Rinse retardant off any plants.
- Use mild detergent and clean water to wash children's outside toys, play equipment, and sports equipment.
- Keep your pets and children away from any puddles from these cleaning activities. Clean up any puddles with soil or sand.

## How do I deal with water damage?

If your home was damaged by water, you will need to take steps to limit the potential for mould to grow. When cleaning water damage, wear the appropriate PPE including masks, gloves, and boots. To help stop mould from growing:

- Check any water-damaged or water-stained surfaces and appliances.

- Clean the affected areas using warm water and soap first.
- Then disinfect the surfaces with a household bleach and water solution (1/2 teaspoon (2 mL) into 4 cups (1 L) of water). The sanitizer solution will help disinfect the water used for cleaning and kill any leftover mould that may have grown.
- Dry all wet items as soon as possible.
- Dry wet or waterlogged carpets as quickly as possible. Remove any underlay. Steam cleaning carpets with a disinfectant should be enough.
- You may need to use a dehumidifier to help to remove extra moisture from the air inside your home.

Notify the proper department if you see any visible mould in your house. This may include the following:

- Band Office/Housing Department
- Insurance company
- Restoration contractor

If you find a small amount of mould (typically under 10 square feet) and you wish to do the cleanup work yourself, see the [steps for mould remediation in private homes \(PDF\)](#).

### ***Need to Talk?***

*The Hope for Wellness Help Line offers immediate help to all Indigenous peoples across Canada. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to offer immediate support and crisis intervention. Call the toll-free Help Line at 1-855-242-3310 or connect to the online chat at [www.hopeforwellness.ca](http://www.hopeforwellness.ca).*

*You can also contact your local Health Centre to access mental health supports.*

Contact:

Indigenous Services Canada  
Environmental Public Health Services  
First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Alberta Region  
Edmonton Phone: (587) 337-3636  
Calgary Phone: (587)337-7980

Source: Alberta Health Services

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