

Returning Home After a Wildfire - Protecting Yourself and Your Family Frequently Asked Questions

- After a wildfire, your home may be affected by smoke, soot and ash, chemicals, structural damage, and water damage.
- **Do not** go back into any areas that were heavily damaged or destroyed by wildfire until the local authorities allow you to return.
- Once you are able to enter burned-out areas safely, be very careful.
 - o Take basic precautions and be aware of hazards to your health and safety.

What hazards should I watch for after a wildfire?

- Slip, trip, and fall hazards from unstable structures, damaged trees, collapsing roofs, open pits, or wet and slippery surfaces.
- Sharp objects such as nails, metal, concrete, or wood debris.
- Ash, soot, and demolition dust.
- Damaged or leaking household hazardous materials such as kitchen and bathroom cleaning products, paint, batteries, and fuel containers.
 - o Follow the guidance from your local authorities on how to properly dispose of these items.
- Small or poorly ventilated areas where carbon monoxide may be present from using pumps, generators, or pressure washers. **Do not enter small/tight spaces.**
- Damaged or leaking pesticides or herbicide containers like ant or weed killer.
 - o Contact local authorities on how to manage these items after a fire.
- Propane cylinders for heating or from a BBQ.
 - o Contact local authorities on how to manage these items after a fire.

If you or your family are injured, get help. If this is an emergency, call 911.

For health advice and information, call your doctor, local Health Centre or call Health Link at 811 to talk to a registered nurse any time, day or night.

What type of breathing protection should I use when entering burned-out areas?

- Use personal protective equipment (PPE) including masks to protect your lungs when you return to your home after a wildfire.
- If you have asthma or a lung condition, you should wear equipment to protect your lungs and only spend short periods of time in these areas.



To protect your breathing, use N95 masks to help filter out and lower the amount of ash and soot that you breathe in.

- You can buy N95 masks at hardware, safety, or construction supply stores, home improvement centres, and pharmacies.
- Look for “NIOSH 95” on the package.
- Masks can sometimes make it feel like it’s harder to breathe. If you think you may have trouble wearing this type of mask, talk with your doctor.

If you can’t find N95 masks, a dust mask that fits well may give you some protection during cleanup.



N95 Mask

How do I wear an N95 mask?

Always read and follow the manufacturer's directions when using a mask. If your mask doesn't have a snug fit, it won't work properly.

What other type of personal protective equipment (PPE) should I use when entering burned-out areas?

Depending on the area and the type of work you are doing, you may need to use protective clothing, gloves, boots, eye protection, head protection, and hearing protection.

- Choose strong clothes and footwear that protects you from “head-to- toe” from cuts, scrapes, punctures, and slips.
 - Wear long sleeve shirts, long pants or coveralls, leather gloves, and boots with thick soles to stop punctures from sharp objects. Steel-toed boots are recommended. Make sure that the clothes and footwear you choose are right for the type of work you’ll be doing and where you’ll be.
- Wear safety glasses or goggles that give you wrap-around protection. Regular sunglasses don’t give you enough protection.
- Wear a protective helmet or hard-hat to clean-up areas where there’s a chance that debris could fall.
- Use ear plugs or safety ear muffs when operating heavy machinery or power tools.

How can I re-enter my yard safely?

Return to your house only once your local authorities have said it's safe to do so. You may not have water, natural gas, or electricity services when you return.

When entering your yard:

- Look to see how stable the trees are around your property. Check for damage on the tree trunk or for visible damage of burned tree roots. Any trees that have been damaged by fire can fall and injure you. They will need to be cut down and taken out.
- Don't touch damaged or fallen power lines and power poles. There may be electrical dangers that you can't see.
- There may be soot, ash, and other fire debris all around your home and yard. Wet down any fire debris you see. This can lower the risk of breathing in soot and ash particles, which can cause health problems for you and your family.
- Places affected by wildfire will likely smell very smoky for a number of days.
- Watch your pets or other animals closely and keep them under your direct control at all times. Fire retardants (fire fighting materials) and fire debris can make them sick. Keeping pets and animals under your direct control will also prevent them from running into hazards around your property.

If you or anyone in your family has breathing problems or asthma, take steps to protect yourself. Smoke and fire ash that stays around your home and yard can make your breathing issues worse.

Call your local Health Centre or call Health Link at 811, or talk with your doctor for any medicine or extra precautions you may need to take at this time.

How can I re-enter my home safely?

Return to your property only once your local authorities have said it's safe to do so. You may not have water, natural gas, or electricity services when you return.

Do not enter your home if you notice or suspect any source of heat or smoke. Call 911.

Check for any visible structural damage to your home that was caused by the fire. **Do not** enter your home if there's any danger of a structural failure or collapse. Things you may notice:

- Roofs and floors may be damaged and may be ready to collapse.
- The brick or cement in your home's foundation or the fireplace chimney can be badly damaged by the heat from the wildfire.
- The concrete foundation of your home may be cracked and leaning or looking like it will collapse. Don't try to go in and don't climb down to try to see what damage there is.

If there is no sign of heat or smoke and no danger of structural failure, use extreme caution when you first enter your home. Take appropriate precautions to protect yourself and family:

- Wear the appropriate PPE including masks, gloves, and boots.
- Return to your property only during daylight hours if possible.

- Don't try to use any light switches in the house. This may create sparks that could cause a fire or explosion if there's a gas leak nearby. Use flashlights and turn them on before you go inside.
- Before turning on any electricity, gas, or water, wait until your utility company has checked and says it's safe. They may have turned off all utilities for your area. You may be able to get more information about utilities from your municipality (town, city, or district).
- Check all electrical appliances and power sources in your home or garage to see if they've been in contact with fire, water, or fire retardant. If they have, don't use any of these until they've been cleared for use by a qualified electrician.
- Turn off all the valves on your propane tank systems and leave valves closed until the supplier inspects your system.

How can fire retardants, soot, ash, and smoke affect my health?

Fire retardant helps to slow down the fire. It contains ammonia which can:

- sting your eyes, cuts, scratches, or sunburnt skin
- irritate your skin
- cause coughing or wheezing
- cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea (if swallowed)

Soot and ash can irritate your eyes and skin or cause breathing problems. These symptoms may be worse depending on the type of soot or ash, how long you're exposed, and if you already have a lung condition.

Smoke can irritate the skin, nose, throat, lungs, and eyes. It can also cause coughing and wheezing. Learn more about the [health effects from wildfire smoke](#).

If you have irritated eyes and skin, flush them thoroughly with water. You can use a gentle soap solution on your skin if you had contact with fire retardant, soot, ash, or smoke.

If you have difficulty breathing, like coughing and wheezing, move away from the area and get medical help right away. Take your prescription inhalers as directed.

How can I protect my pets when we return home after a wildfire?

- Thoroughly shampoo your pets if they've had contact with smoke, soot, ash, or fire retardants. Clean up any puddles that come from shampooing with soil or sand.
- Make sure animals don't drink water from puddles that have fire retardants, soot, ash, or other fire debris.
- If your pet looks sick from eating or drinking fire retardants or other products left over from the fire, take them to a veterinarian.

Where can I get help when returning home after a wildfire?

If you are insured:

- Contact your insurance company or broker as soon as possible.

- Take lots of pictures.
- Your local Band Office may give you more information about making insurance claims.

Help may also be available through provincial or municipal emergency social services or local private service organizations such as:

- Canadian Red Cross
- Salvation Army
- Local religious organizations
- Non-profit crisis centres
- Local emergency social services

Visit your local reception or information centres to find out more.

What do I need to know about working with restoration contractors?

Work with and through your insurance company as much as you can. They'll have contractors who they approve and work with. Contractors must meet [applicable safety codes standards](#).

If anyone in your family is sensitive to chemicals or mould, your restoration contractor needs to know so that they can take all necessary precautions.

For information about choosing a private contractor or if you have questions about your contract, contact the [Service Alberta Consumer Contact Centre](#). They can give you more information about these types of consumer issues.

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.

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
Adapted from: <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/wildfire-protecting-yourself-and-your-family.aspx>