

WILDFIRE SMOKE FACTSHEET



Protect Yourself from Ash

Protect yourself from harmful ash when you clean up after a wildfire. Cleanup work can expose you to ash and other products of the fire that may irritate your eyes, nose, or skin and cause coughing and other health effects. Ash inhaled deeply into lungs may cause asthma attacks and make it difficult to breathe.

Ash is made up of larger and tiny particles (dust, dirt, and soot). Ash deposited on surfaces both indoors and outdoors can be inhaled if it becomes airborne when you clean up. Ash from burned structures is generally more hazardous than forest ash.

Avoid Ash Exposure

Avoid direct contact with ash. If you get ash on your skin, in your eyes, or in your mouth, wash it off as soon as you can.

People with heart or lung disease, including asthma, older adults, children, and pregnant women should use special caution around ash.

Children and pets: Children should not be nearby while you clean up ash. Do not allow children to play in ash. Clean ash off all children's toys before use. Clean ash off pets and other animals. Keep pets away from contaminated sites.

Recommended Actions

Clothing: Wear gloves, long-sleeved shirts, long pants, shoes and socks to avoid skin contact. Goggles are also a good idea. Contact with wet ash can cause chemical burns or skin irritation. Change your shoes and clothing before you leave the cleanup site to avoid tracking ash offsite, into your car, or other places.



Use an N95 respirator and avoid skin contact with ash.

Protecting your lungs: Wear a tight-fitting respirator that filters ash particles from the air you breathe to help protect your lungs. Select a respirator that has been tested and approved by NIOSH and has the words "NIOSH" and either "N95" or "P100" printed on it. These have two straps and are available online, and at many hardware stores and pharmacies. Buy respirators in a size that can be tightened over your mouth and nose with a snug seal to your face. Surgical masks and one-strap dust masks will *not* protect your lungs. They are not designed to seal tightly to the face. If you have heart or lung disease talk to your doctor before using a respirator or working around ash.

Cleanup: Avoid stirring up or sifting through ash as much as you can. Avoid actions that kick ash particles up into the air, such as dry sweeping. Before sweeping indoor and outdoor hard surfaces, mist them with water to keep dust down. Follow with wet mopping. Use a damp cloth or wet mop on lightly dusted areas. When you wet down ash, use as little water as you can.

Vacuum: Use a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA)-type vacuum to clean dusty surfaces. Don't use a typical household vacuum or a shop vacuum. They will send the collected dust or ash out into the air. Don't use leaf blowers or do anything else that will put ash into the air.

Food and Water: Wash any home-grown fruits or vegetables from trees or gardens where ash has fallen. Avoid bringing food or eating at the affected site, unless you keep the food in a sealed container.

Wash your hands well before eating. Check with your drinking water provider to be sure your water is safe to drink.

Disposal: Collected ash may be disposed of in the regular trash. Ash should be stored in plastic bags or other containers to prevent it from being stirred up. If you suspect hazardous waste, including asbestos, is present, contact your local hazardous waste authorities regarding appropriate disposal. Avoid washing ash into storm drains.

For more information:

- **Get air quality information:** Check your local news, the airnow.gov website, or your state air quality agency's website.
- **Learn about home air cleaners:** <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/guide-air-cleaners-home>
- **Find certified air cleaning devices:** <http://www.arb.ca.gov/research/indoor/aircleaners/certified.htm>
- **Learn how to use an N95 respirator mask:** http://www.bepreparedcalifornia.ca.gov/ResourcesAndLinks/Languages/Documents/English/ENG_ProtectLungsSmoke7208color.pdf
- **Learn more about wildfire smoke:** *Wildfire Smoke, A Guide for Public Health Officials:* https://www3.epa.gov/airnow/wildfire_may2016.pdf

