

Guidance for Those Returning to Areas Affected by Fire Damage

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ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH



Many people returning to homes and schools near burn properties have questions about what to do to mitigate possible health risks associated with the fires. As a reminder, fires create significant potential exposure to smoke, soot (fine, black powdery substance that forms when things burn) and ash that may contain hazardous materials including lead, arsenic, and heavy metals.

Returning to Areas Affected by Wildfires.

Los Angeles County is dedicated to restoring our communities swiftly and safely after the recent wildfires. The debris removal process is divided into two main phases, each managed by different agencies. Phase 1 household hazardous debris removal is free, currently underway, and managed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). For properties eligible for Phase 2 removal of the remaining fire debris, property owners have the option to *opt-in* for free cleanup by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers OR *opt-out* and pay a specialized, approved contractor to remove, transport, and dispose of the remaining fire debris, following all necessary requirements, rules and regulations. For more information, please recovery.lacounty.gov.

During Phase 1 of the debris removal process, which is currently underway, the US EPA is going through fire damaged neighborhoods to safely remove and dispose of visible hazardous materials from burned properties. EPA has said they will complete Phase 1 in 30 days. **If you are living near areas with significant fire debris or burned buildings nearby**, it is prudent to avoid being outdoors near these properties while hazardous materials are being removed, even though this process should not result in significant disturbance of ash and other fire debris.

If you're returning to a home in an area with significant fire debris or burned buildings nearby, it may be advisable to wait until all the remaining fire debris has been removed from nearby burned properties before moving back in. Debris removal in Phase 2 may stir up ash and soot, which may affect air quality. Steps will be taken in the process to reduce this risk.

For those who are returning to unburned homes, many people have concerns about what to look for, how to clean safely, and whether your property might still pose risks even if it wasn't directly damaged.

These are valid concerns, as proximity to burn areas can present health and safety risks, even if your home or school is intact. Individuals with underlying health conditions that can be exacerbated by exposures to soot, ash, and fire debris may want to consult with their medical provider for guidance on when it is advisable to return and ways to reduce your risk of exposure.

If you have concerns, you may want to talk with a professional cleaning or restoration service contractor and your insurance company to get guidance.

Assessing for Contamination

Understanding how to properly assess your property will help you decide how to reduce any health and safety risks and remediate any smoke damage, whether professional assistance is needed, and when it is advisable to reoccupy your home.

A suggested first step is to assess the extent of smoke, soot, and ash contamination, as the level of contamination determines the appropriate cleaning measures and steps you should take:

- If there is no visible soot or ash on horizontal surfaces, no visible suspended particles, and no noticeable smoke odor, homeowners do not need to undertake any specific remediation actions.
- In cases where there is no visible soot or ash, a wipe test, where you wipe a wall or windowsill, confirming no soot or ash, can help determine that there was not significant intrusion of dangerous ash or soot.
- For situations involving light soot or ash on horizontal surfaces and/or visible airborne particulate and/or noticeable smoke odors, a more thorough cleaning is recommended.

Cleaning Tips

When cleaning, always wear an N95 mask, gloves, long sleeves and pants, and goggles to protect yourself from exposure. Avoid dry sweeping, as this can stir up harmful particles into the air.

Use wet cleaning methods, such as gently hosing down and cleaning outdoor areas, outdoor furniture, windows, windowsills, doors, and doorsills. Wipe surfaces indoors and outdoors with damp cloths. Collect ash in sealed plastic bags and dispose of it in covered trash bins.

If you notice signs of significant soot, smoke residue, or odors in your home, it's important to assess whether professional cleaning is necessary.

Securing Professional Assistance

The following guidelines are helpful when selecting a professional cleaning or restoration service contractor for smoke, soot, and ash restoration.

First, if you're filing an insurance claim, check with your insurance company to see if they have firms they would recommend or firms they contract with for this type of work. If you end up looking for a professional cleaning contract yourself, confirm that the contractor is properly licensed by the State or County and has the required bonding and liability insurance coverage. Additionally, you can ask the contractor if they work with your insurance company and verify this with your insurance agent.

You may also want to check references, check with the [Better Business Bureau](#), and/or follow up with past customers to ask about their experiences with a particular contractor prior to signing a contract.

It is also essential to request certifications from the contractor, including company and employee certifications from organizations like the [Institute of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certification \(IICRC\)](#) and the [Restoration Industry Association \(RIA\)](#).

Before agreeing to start or paying for any work, you should also obtain a detailed, written estimate of the work to be done and the schedule for doing it from the contractor, and do not proceed without one. **While indoor testing can be helpful in some circumstances, it is important to know that there are no laboratory tests that can determine if your property is “safe” and all lab results must be evaluated in context with environmental conditions in and around your property.** It is best to avoid contractors who fail to provide specific cost and schedule details in the contract.

Continue to Monitor Your Health

Lastly, **as you reoccupy your homes, continue to monitor your health and the health of your family.** Symptoms like coughing, eye irritation, or headaches could be linked to lingering contaminants.

Individuals, such as children, the elderly, or those with respiratory conditions, should take extra precautions or avoid reentering the home until it has been cleaned. And everyone should avoid contact with outdoor areas that have not been cleaned.

Public health has more detailed information on sensible precautions on our wildfire website, which you can find at publichealth.lacounty.gov and you can speak with an environmental health specialist if you call 626-430-9821.