

Tips for Safe Cleanup of Fire Ash and Debris

The local fires have resulted in large volumes of fire ash and debris. When mandatory evacuations are lifted, residents who return to their effected homes and neighborhood should use caution when they come in contact with these materials.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, ash deposited by forest fires is relatively non-toxic and similar to ash found in fireplaces, however, any ash, particularly from ash and debris found inside burned structures will contain small amounts of cancer-causing chemicals or carcinogens. It's important to note that ash may be irritating to the skin (especially to those with sensitive skin) and if breathed could irritate the nose and throat causing coughing and even trigger asthmatic attacks in people who have asthma.

In an effort to avoid possible health problems the EPA has developed a list of recommended steps to follow when cleaning up after a fire:

- Do not allow children to play in ash.
- Wash ash off children's toys before children play with them.
- Clean ash off house pets.
- Wear gloves, long-sleeved shirts and long pants and avoid skin contact.
- If you do get ash on your skin, wash it off as soon as possible.
- If you have a garden or fruit trees, wash the fruit or vegetables thoroughly before eating them.
- Avoid getting ash in the air as much as possible. Do not use leaf blowers or take other actions that will put ash in the air.
- Gentle sweeping of indoor and outdoor hard surfaces followed by wet mopping is the best procedure in most cases. A damp cloth or wet mop may be all that is needed on lightly dusted areas.
- Use a HEPA-filter vacuum cleaner. Shop vacuums and other common vacuum cleaners do not filter out small particles but rather blow such particles at the exhaust into the air where they can be breathed.
- Wear a well-fitted mask for protection during cleanup; rated N-95 or P-100 will be more effective than simpler dust or surgical masks in blocking particles from ash. In general, many ash particles are larger than those found in smoke; thus wearing a dust mask can significantly reduce (but not completely eliminate) the amount of particles inhaled.
- Persons with heart or lung disease should consult their physical before using a mask during post-fire cleanup.
- Avoid washing ash into storm drains whenever possible.
- Collected ash may be disposed of in the regular trash. Ash may be stored in plastic bags or other containers that will prevent it from being disturbed. If ash is wet down, use as little water as possible.

What to do when ash stops falling: Falling ash is a problem while fires continue to rage throughout the County. But after the flames are gone and it stops coming down, clearing your house, car, boat and yard will be a problem. Because runoff water filled with ash can clog storm drains and pollute our waterways, you need to take steps to minimize the impact. There are several things you can do:

- Determine if ash and debris can be contained and cleaned up without washing material into the storm water system.
- Wash ash and debris into landscaped areas wherever practical.
- Use a damp mop to clean up ash and debris from small areas.
- Dampen accumulated ash and debris and scrape it up or vacuum it up using an adequate filtering vacuum.
- Take your car to a car wash or wash it over a vegetated area such as your lawn
- If washing your roof, redirect downspouts to landscaped areas
- Use a high efficiency, HEPA type vacuum to clean your indoor carpets
- Use a damp cloth to pick up dust from smaller surfaces
- Use a damp mop for non-porous surfaces like tile or vinyl floors

In relation to clean up, residents and volunteers should use caution since the clean-up process involves ashes and other particles. People with lung or heart problems should avoid clean-up activities and areas where dust or soot are present. Thoroughly wet soot area prior to clean-up. This will help to reduce the amount of particulates becoming airborne. Wear an appropriate dust mask during clean-up.

What to do after a wildfire:

- Use caution and exercise good judgment when re-entering a burned wildland area. Hazards may still exist.
- Avoid damaged or fallen power poles or lines, and downed wires. Report electrical damage immediately.
- Be careful around burned trees and power poles. They may have lost stability due to fire damage.
- Watch for ash pits and mark them for safety. Ash pits are holes full of hot ashes, created by burned trees and stumps.
- If a power line or pole should fall next to you, hop out of the area. You are less likely to be shocked if you are hopping.

Returning to your home:

- If there is no power, check your main breaker.
- Inspect the roof immediately and extinguish any sparks or embers.
- For several hours afterward, recheck for smoke and sparks.
- Take precautions while cleaning your property.
- If you have a propane tank system, contact your supplier, turn off valves and leave valves closed.
- If you have a heating oil tank system, contact a heating oil supplier for an inspection of your system before using.