



News Release

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CONTACT: Corey Egel | 916.440.7259 | CDPHpress@cdph.ca.gov

State Health Officer Urges Caution During Wildfire Cleanup

SACRAMENTO - California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Director and State Health Officer Dr. Karen Smith today advised residents of recently burned areas to use caution in cleaning up ash from recent wildfires. Ash from trees burned in wildfires is relatively nontoxic and similar to ash that might be found in your fireplace. However, ash from burned homes and other items will likely contain metals, chemicals, and potentially asbestos, items that may be considered toxic if breathed in or touched with wet skin.

“As the clean-up process begins and people return to burned areas, it is important to be aware of potential health hazards, understand how to reduce risks, and know when to seek medical attention,” said Dr. Smith.

If ash is inhaled, it can be irritating to the nose, throat, and lungs. Exposure to airborne ash may trigger asthmatic attacks in people who already have the respiratory condition. In order to avoid possible health problems, the following steps are recommended for people in burned areas with ash:

- Do not allow children to play in ash or be in an area where ash-covered materials are being disturbed. Wash ash off toys before children play with them. Clean ash off pets.
- Wear a tight-fitting N95 or P100 respirator mask, gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants when cleaning up ash. Avoid skin contact. If you do get ash on your skin, wash it off immediately. Some wet ash can cause chemical burns.
- Avoid getting ash into the air as much as possible, for example, by avoiding sweeping it up dry. Use water and wet cloth or a mop to clean items and surfaces. Do not use leaf blowers or take other actions that will put ash into the air.
- Shop vacuums and other common vacuum cleaners do not filter out small particles. They blow such particles out the exhaust into the air where they can be inhaled. The

use of shop vacuums and other non-HEPA filter vacuums is not recommended. HEPA filter vacuums could be used, if available.

“Residents should seek medical care if they experience health issues such as chest pain, chest tightness or shortness of breath. It is especially important to monitor children and young adults as they may be more susceptible to the health and emotional effects of fire recovery,” said Dr. Smith.

Avoid Breathing Wildfire Smoke

Smoke from wildfires can cause eye and respiratory irritation and some more serious disorders, including reduced lung function and bronchitis. Breathing smoke can also make asthma symptoms worse.

In areas where wildfires are still burning, people should stay indoors and reduce outdoor activity. People who must be outdoors for long periods, in areas with heavy smoke, or where ash is disturbed, should wear an N95 respirator mask. Those with underlying respiratory, lung or heart problems should limit their exposure by staying indoors. Since wearing a respirator can make it harder to breathe, those with lung or heart problems should ask their doctor before using one.

Visit [CDPH's website](#) for more information on how you can protect yourself during a wildfire and the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services for more information on the [hazardous debris](#), and [wildfire recovery](#).

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