



County of Santa Cruz

Health Services Agency ♦ Environmental Health Division

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Tips for Returning to a Fire Damaged Property

The CZU Lightning Complex Fire has resulted in large volumes of fire ash and debris throughout Santa Cruz County. As mandatory evacuations are lifted, residents who return to their effected homes and neighborhood should use caution when they come in contact with these materials.

Tips for Cleaning Your Home and Yard

According to the California Department of Health and Human Services, ash deposited by forest fires is relatively nontoxic, 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 inhaled could irritate the nose and throat causing coughing and even trigger asthmatic attacks in people who have asthma. After the flames are gone and ash stops falling, cleaning your house, car, boat and yard will be a priority. 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:

- 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 vegetable 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.
- Determine if ash and debris can be contained and cleaned up without washing material into the nearby water systems or stormdrains. Avoid allowing ash to runoff whenever possible.
- Wash ash and debris into landscaped areas wherever practical
- 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.
- 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
- 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.
- In relation to clean up, residents and volunteers should use caution since the clean-up process involves ashes and other particulates:

- People with lung or heart problems should avoid clean-up activities and areas where dust or soot are present. Thoroughly wet dusty and soot area prior to clean-up. This will help to reduce the amount of particulates becoming air-borne.
- Wear an appropriate dust mask during clean-up. If exposure to asbestos or other hazardous materials are suspected (such as ash immediately surrounding a burned house), do not disturb the area. Dust masks do not protect against asbestos.

Inspecting the Landscape After a Fire

Use caution and exercise good judgment when re-entering a burned wildland area. Hazards may still exist, including hot spots, which can flare up without warning.

- Avoid damaged or fallen power poles or lines, and downed wires. Immediately report electrical damage to authorities. Electric wires may shock people or cause further fires. If possible, remain on the scene to warn others of the hazard until repair crews arrive.
- 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. You can be seriously burned by falling into ash pits or landing in them with your hands or feet. Warn your family and neighbors to keep clear of the pits.
- 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.
- If you have a propane tank system, contact a propane supplier, turn off valves on the system, and leave valves closed until the supplier inspects your system. Tanks, brass and copper fittings and lines may have been damaged from the heat and be unsafe. If fire burned the tank, the pressure relief valve probably opened and released the contents.
- If you have a heating oil tank system, contact a heating oil supplier for an inspection of your system before using. The tank may have shifted or fallen from the stand and fuel lines may have kinked or weakened. Heat from the fire may have caused the tank to warp or bulge. Nonvented tanks are more likely to bulge or show signs of stress. The fire may have loosened or damaged fittings and filters.
- Visually check the stability of the trees. Any tree that has been weakened by fire may be a hazard. Winds are normally responsible for toppling weakened trees. The wind patterns in your area may have changed as a result of the loss of adjacent tree cover.
- Look for burnt roots by probing the ground with a rod around the base of the tree and several feet away from the base. Roots are generally six to eight inches below the surface. If the roots have been burned, you should consider this tree very unstable, and it may be toppled by wind.
- A scorched tree is one that has lost part or all of its leaves or needles. Healthy deciduous trees are resilient and may produce new branches and leaves as well as sprouts at the base of the tree. Evergreen trees may survive when partially scorched. An evergreen tree that has been damaged by fire is subject to bark beetle attack. Please seek professional assistance from the forestry service concerning measures for protecting evergreens from bark beetle attack.