

Reopening Your Building After a Wildfire

In addition to the physical damage fires can cause, there are risks associated with smoke, ash, chemicals and water that damage building interiors and work spaces.

Below are the most immediate steps that should be followed once it is SAFE to enter the premises.

- Contact your insurance company/ broker as soon as possible. The sooner the insurance company is notified, the quicker your insurance claim can be processed.
- Take plenty of pictures of the damage to the property. This will help with your insurance claim.
- Work with your insurance company agent to find out what is covered, what is not covered and what may be subject to further discussion.
- Work with your insurance company and their accredited fire restoration companies to try to restore or rebuild the building.
- Try to create an inventory of items, both inside and outside the buildings, which have been damaged by fire, smoke, chemicals, soot or ash. Photograph or videotape the damage as much possible. Do not throw away any damaged goods until after the inventory is made by the insurance assessor.

1. *Protect Yourself:*

- Wear protective personal equipment (PPE) that includes a mask and gloves when assessing and cleaning your establishment. In particular, people with asthma or respiratory conditions should only spend short periods of time in these areas and wear respiratory protection.

Breathing protection:

- Use N95 rated masks to help filter out and reduce exposure to fine dust particles such as ash, soot, and other nuisance-type particles. A mask rated N95, when properly fitted (see next section below) will be more effective than a dust mask or surgical mask in blocking particles from ash.

- Look for “NIOSH 95” on the package. N95 means the mask blocks about 95 percent of particles that are 0.3 microns in size or larger.
- Purchase N95 masks at hardware, safety/construction supply businesses and home improvement centres.
- Masks can add physical stress to a person by making it harder to breathe. Individuals who have any doubts concerning their ability to wear a mask should consult with their personal physician.
- If you cannot locate N95 masks, a well-fitting dust mask may provide some protection during cleanup. Many ash particles are larger than those found in smoke, and a dust mask can significantly reduce the amount of particles inhaled.

How to Self-Fit N95 Masks:

- Always read and follow the manufacturer's directions when using a mask.
- The mask must cover both the nose and mouth to keep you from breathing in dust and ash.
- If the mask does not have a snug fit, it will not work properly. Correct fit of the respirator requires contact with smooth skin. Masks will not work properly for people with beards or facial hair.
- Always use both straps on the respirator to hold it in place to keep air from leaking around the respirator.
- Do a user seal check, including both positive and negative pressure checks, to verify that you have correctly put on the respirator and adjusted it to fit properly.
- Negative pressure check - Place both hands completely over the respirator and inhale sharply. Be careful not to disturb the position of the respirator. The respirator should pull into your face. If air leaks around your face or eyes, adjust the nosepiece and straps and repeat the positive pressure check.
- Positive pressure check - Put your hands over the respirator and breathe out sharply. If your respirator has an exhalation valve be sure to cover the exhalation valve when you exhale. No air should leak out of the respirator if the respirator fits properly. If air leaks out, re-adjust the nosepiece and straps and repeat the negative pressure check.

- Use a flashlight to look for hazards. If you detect or suspect any source of heat or smoke, notify the fire department immediately.
- Watch for hazards, including:
 - Slip, trip and fall hazards from unstable structures, or wet and slippery surfaces;
 - Sharp objects such as metal pieces, concrete or wood;
 - Ash, soot and demolition dust;
 - Hazardous materials such as workplace chemicals, kitchen and bathroom cleaning products, pesticides, paint, batteries, and fuel containers which have been partially damaged or destroyed;
 - Propane cylinders for heating or from a BBQ.

2. Be careful when near fire retardants and fire residues

- Fire retardant contains ammonia which can
 - sting eyes, cuts, scratches or sunburnt skin
 - irritate intact skin
 - cause coughing/wheezing
 - cause gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea if ingested.
- Soot and ash can cause symptoms including:
 - eye and skin irritation
 - respiratory issues

These symptoms may be significant depending on the type of soot/ash, amount of exposure, and underlying respiratory conditions.

- Smoke can irritate the skin, nose, throat, lungs and eyes and can cause coughing and wheezing. For more information on health effects from wildfire smoke, please see [Wildfire Smoke and Your Health](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/wf/eph/wf-eph-wildfire-smoke-health.pdf) available at <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/wf/eph/wf-eph-wildfire-smoke-health.pdf>
- Flush your eyes thoroughly with water and/or skin thoroughly with water and a gentle soap solution if contact with fire retardant, soot, ash or smoke.
- If you have respiratory symptoms such as coughing, move away from the area, take any prescription inhalers as directed, and if you are having trouble breathing, seek medical attention promptly.

3. Check Your Utilities:

- Check that electricity, hot and cold running water, sewage system, and gas utilities are in proper working order. If you are not sure if the utilities are safe to use, contact utility provider.
- Do not try to use any electrical appliances or power that may have come in contact with fire, water, or fire retardant until they have been checked and cleared for use by a qualified electrician.

4. Use Your Water Supply Safely:

- Your facility may be under a boil water advisory. Review “[Boil Water Advisory: How to Use Water Safely in Your Home](https://myhealth.alberta.ca/alberta/pages/Boil-water-advisory-how-to-use-water-safely-in-your-home.aspx)” (available at <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/alberta/pages/Boil-water-advisory-how-to-use-water-safely-in-your-home.aspx> for information on how to use water safely.
- Boil water information for the below listed types of public facilities is also available at <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/eph/Page8302.aspx> under the ‘Drinking Water, Boil Water Advisories and Water Sampling’ heading :
 - [Long Term Care, Supportive Living and Home Living Sites](#)
 - [Hotels or Motels](#)
 - [Schools](#)
- You do not need to boil your water to clean the facility prior to opening.
- Once the boil water advisory is lifted, be sure to:
 - Flush all water-using fixtures by running the tap for five minutes. If your service connection is long or complex, consider flushing for a longer period of time.
 - Ensure equipment with water line connections such as post-mix beverage machines, auto-fill coffee/tea makers, instant hot water heaters, ice machines, etc. are flushed, cleaned and disinfected according to the manufacturer’s recommendations before use.
 - Flush, drain, clean and disinfect cisterns that contained the affected water source. See [How to Clean and Disinfect a Cistern](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/wf/eph/wf-eph-clean-disinfect-cistern-sz-fire.pdf) at <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/wf/eph/wf-eph-clean-disinfect-cistern-sz-fire.pdf>
 - Run water softeners through a regeneration cycle according to the manufacturer’s recommendations before use.

- Drain and refill hot water heaters that have been set below 45°C/110°F.

5. Discard items impacted by smoke, heat, ash and chemicals

- Food, medicines, cleaners, cosmetics and other toiletries can be damaged by heat, smoke and lingering chemical residues.
- There will be items that, after inspection of your fire-damaged building, need to be properly disposed of. Before disposing items, make sure that you inventory those items as part of your fire insurance claim.

Foods:

- Take stock of any food in your facility that you are able to see.
- For insurance purposes, take plenty of photos and write down an inventory of the contents of any fridges and freezers.
- Fridges and freezers will have been without power for some time now and will likely smell.
- Be sure to discard:
 - Food stored in refrigerators and freezers IF the temperature was greater than 4°C at any time.
 - Please note that the temperature may have exceeded 4°C when the power was disrupted and then returned to 4°C.
 - Any food that has spoiled, even if the fridge remained at 4°C at all times.
 - Open foods.
 - Fire or smoke damaged foods like dry goods (i.e. flour, sugar, spices, etc.) even if the package isn't open.
 - Unrefrigerated raw vegetables or fruits.
 - Foods that were stored in porous containers (e.g. cardboard, foam containers, etc).
 - Canned food where the can is bulging, rusted or dented.
 - Jarred foods, as the heat from the fire likely compromised the safety seal.
- Be safe. If in doubt, throw it out.
- Clean and disinfect all canned foods before opening to make sure that the contents aren't contaminated.
- Follow current local guidelines on where food waste may be discarded.

6. *Clean building and facilities:*

Restoration contractors:

- As much as possible, work with and through your insurance company. They will know reputable restoration and cleaning contractors that can help you and that know the proper standards to follow.
- If you decide to choose your own restoration contractor, check their references and certifications.
- If there are questions or issues arising, contact the Service Alberta Consumer Contact Centre (toll free number is 1 877 427 4088). They can help provide you with more information about various consumer issues.

Building exterior and outdoor areas:

- Wet down remaining fire debris. Do not wash the fire debris into the street.
- Scrape up fire ash and soot remaining on your property as much as possible, place it in plastic bags or other containers that will prevent it from being disturbed, and take it to a landfill.
- If the building was totally destroyed by fire then the restoration company will look after this for you as they begin the demolition and recovery process.
- Use a hose, sprayer or pressure washer on the building exterior, parking lots, walkways, vehicles, and outdoor furniture.
- Be careful when using pumps, pressure washers or generators in enclosed spaces. Carbon monoxide may be present in confined or poorly ventilated areas where from the operation of pumps, generators, or pressure washers.
- If you have a private septic system, check the area around your system for damage, like sewage leaks. Contact a sewage disposal professional if you find damage to your septic system.
- Outdoor equipment may contain fire retardants that can be toxic to fish, some plants and may make people and pets sick if ingested. They can also cause eye irritation, dry skin and stinging to cuts and scrapes on your skin.
- Wash down outdoor equipment with clean water and detergent to remove residual fire contaminants. To clean windows and glass, use clean water and a razor blade tool to help to remove the sticky residue.
- NEVER use bleach as the reaction between bleach and fire retardants will produce harmful and explosive gasses.

- If you choose to remediate lawns, you can re-sod or reseed grassy areas.
- Consider adding new, clean soil to gardens if you suspect or know the area was impacted.

Air circulation:

- A professional should be consulted to clean, restore and restart any building HVAC systems.
- Get the air moving inside the building by using a fan and open windows, providing there is no smoke or air quality advisory for the area. Also be careful with open doors and windows during windy conditions, to prevent any ash/debris left over from the fires from coming into the building.
- Ozone generators do not function as “air cleaners” despite advertising claims.

Interior surfaces:

- There may be smoke damage and soot in the building after the fire. Contact your insurance company and fire restoration company as soon as possible.
- The fire restoration contractor will be able to give you more information about:
 - Preventing further damage;
 - Determining which things can or cannot be properly cleaned;
 - Thoroughly cleaning and deodorizing the building before people are allowed back in.
- As with hiring any service, be clear ahead of time whether it is you or your insurance company that will pay, get estimates in writing, and get a referral from your insurance company.
- Use PPE as appropriate, such as masks, rubber gloves, rubber boots, long sleeved shirt and pants.
- Wash all interior surfaces with mild detergent or appropriate cleaning solution and rinse thoroughly. Include all locations where there is any ash, dust or the odour of fire.
- Wash interior of windows thoroughly.
- Wet wiping or mopping is safer and more effective than dry or dust mopping.
- Only vacuum with a unit which has a “HEPA” filter which can catch ash particles. Using unfiltered vacuums will just move the ash around the building. Change your HEPA filter frequently.

- Ash left in place is reduced into smaller particles and becomes harder to remove from carpets and surfaces.
- Wash and clean all ash-contaminated items with mild detergent, changing the water frequently.

Fabric, carpets and furniture:

- Soot is oily and can stain carpets, curtains and soft furnishing. It must be removed before you try to clean or deodorize those items.
- Steam clean carpets, drapes and curtains, changing the water frequently.
- Furniture may be difficult or almost impossible to clean if it is upholstered, especially if the smoke odour has permeated into these furnishings.
- Furniture may be steam cleaned or may need to be replaced.
- You can clean and rinse good-quality wood furniture.

Electronics:

- Contact your insurance company for information about restoring / replacing electronic devices.
- Otherwise, it is recommended that you carry all electronic equipment outside and “blow out” the components with an air hose, before equipment is turned on. Ash can cause static charges.
- Consider unplugging, rolling out and either blowing out or rinsing the coils and compressors on refrigerators and freezers (they must dry completely before repowering).
- During a fire, indoor materials may end up into drainage systems and partly block them or just sit there and rot. Carefully flush and disinfect floor drains and sump pits. Some physical scrubbing may be needed to get greasy dirt and grime off surfaces that can release pollutants into the indoor air.

Repair water damage:

- If the building was damaged by water, you will need to get rid of all excess water to prevent potential for mold growth.
- To help prevent mold growth, any water-damaged or water-stained surfaces and appliances should be checked for damage and cleaned and disinfected with a 1:10 parts household bleach to water solution (1 tsp bleach in 750 ml of water or 1 capful bleach in 1 gallon of water).
- Dry all wet items as soon as possible.
- Wet or waterlogged carpeting should be dried as quickly as possible and any underlay should be removed. Steam cleaning carpets with a disinfectant should be adequate.
- You may need to use a dehumidifier to help to remove excess moisture from the air inside the building.
- Let your insurance company and restoration contractor know as soon as possible if you find any visible mold growth or smell mold inside the building.
- If you discover a small amount of mold (typically under 10 square feet), and you wish to complete the work yourself, more information is available here:
<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/AlbertaDocuments/mould-remediation-private-homes.pdf>

For more information, please contact your nearest Environmental Public Health office.

*Edmonton Main Office
Calgary Main Office
Lethbridge Main Office*

*780-735-1800
403-943-2288
403-388-6689*

*Grande Prairie Main Office
Red Deer Main Office
www.ahs.ca/eph*

*780-513-7517
403-356-6366*