



# Returning home after wildfire evacuation

This information is a collection of health and safety items to think about as you return to your home and property **that has not been directly impacted by fire damage.**

After a wildfire near your home, your home and/or property may be affected by smoke, soot, and ash.

Do not go back into any areas that were heavily damaged or destroyed by wildfire until the local authorities allow you to return. Once you can enter areas safely, take basic precautions and be aware of hazards to your health and safety.

## **When and what type of breathing protection should I use when entering these areas?**

When you return to your home after a wildfire, the air quality may still be impacted by soot, ash, etc. It is important to take steps to protect your lungs and airways. This includes limiting the time you spend in areas with poor air quality. Make sure to assess your need for any personal protective equipment (PPE) including masks to aid in your protection. Individuals with asthma or a lung condition need to take extra precaution.

To protect your breathing, respirator style masks such as N95, KN95, P100 or higher-rated masks, can be used as additional protection from breathing in ash and soot. They are designed to filter out fine particles, offering an added layer of protection for your lungs and airways. For masks to work, it's important that they are used correctly, fit snugly, and are replaced frequently. Do not rely on "dust" masks for protection. Paper "comfort" or "dust" masks commonly found at hardware stores only trap larger particles, such as sawdust.

## **What other type of personal protective equipment (PPE) might I need in cleaning up my home and property when I return after the wildfire?**

Depending on the area and the type of work you are doing, you may need to use protective clothing. It is important for you to assess this need. Personal protective clothing can include things such as gloves, boots, eye protection, head protection, and hearing protection.

- Choose strong clothes and footwear that protects you from "head-to-toe" from cuts, scrapes, punctures, and slips. Wear long sleeve shirts, long pants or coveralls, leather gloves, and boots with thick soles to stop punctures from sharp objects. Steel-toed boots are recommended. Make sure that the clothes and footwear you choose are right for the type of work you'll be doing and where you'll be.

- Safety glasses or goggles should have wrap-around protection.
- Protective hard-hats can be used to clean-up areas where there's a chance that debris could fall.

### **How can I re-enter my yard safely?**

Return to your property only once your local authorities have said it's safe to do so. You may not have water, natural gas, or electricity services when you return.

When entering your yard:

There may be soot, ash, and other fire debris around your home and yard. Wet down any fire debris you see. This can lower the risk of breathing in soot and ash particles, which can cause health problems for you and your family.

- If you or anyone in your family has breathing problems or asthma, take steps to protect yourself. Smoke and fire ash that stays around your home and yard can make your breathing issues worse.
- If you decide to clean your yard and surrounding areas yourself, wear the appropriate PPE including masks, gloves, and boots. For children's play areas and equipment, clear away any debris and remove puddles and standing water.
- If there are signs of damage to play equipment, block access to the area until the equipment is repaired or replaced.
- If there are signs of damage to your on-site sewage disposal system. You should contact a qualified person to assess your system. You can find qualified persons at this website: <https://novascotia.ca/nse/cms/search.asp>.
- Sand, gravel, or other loose materials placed under playground equipment should be removed and replaced, especially if you can see ash, soot, and small debris.

### **How can I re-enter my home safely?**

Return to your property only once your local authorities have said it's safe to do so.

- Do not enter your home if you notice or suspect any source of heat or smoke. Call 911.
- Return to your property only during daylight hours if possible.

## **What if I have a home heating oil tank?**

- Homeowners are encouraged to have a licensed burner technician check your tank, lines and appliances to look for any visible damage (like dents, swelling, discoloration, peeling paint). Tanks should also be checked to see if they are still well supported on non-combustible footings. More information on fuel safety can be found on Labour, Skills and Immigration website [Fuel Safety | novascotia.ca](https://www.novascotia.ca/fuelsafety)
- If fuel is visible on the ground, contain the spill, by constructing a small berm or placing absorbent material like cat litter on the area. If safe, scoop any absorbed material into a metal container to prevent it from entering the environment. Keep any spilled or absorbed material in a well-ventilated area.
  - o Contact your insurance company.
  - o You may require the services of specialised contractors or environmental consultants.
  - o More information for homeowners with fuel spills is available on the Environment and Climate Change website at [Domestic Oil Spills | Contaminated Sites \(novascotia.ca\)](https://www.ec.gc.ca/contaminated-sites).

## **What items will I need to throw out when I return home?**

Food, medicines, cleaning products, cosmetics, and other personal care products can be damaged by heat, smoke, ash, and water used to fight the fire. You will need to inspect and may need to properly dispose of these items after your return home.

## **How do I handle food that was in my home during the wildfire?**

Throw away perishable food stored in your refrigerator, cooler, or freezer if the temperature inside the appliance went above 4C (40F) for longer than two hours. If you do not know how long your home was without power, you should dispose of all perishable food in those appliances. If your appliance lost power, the temperature may have gone above 4C (40F) when the power was off and then returned to temperature when the power came back on.

There are foods you may store in your fridge and freezer that are safe to consume if the temperature was above 4C (40F). Please refer to the detailed list of frozen and refrigerated foods that you do not have to discard if power was off, at [factsheet-poweroff.pdf \(novascotia.ca\)](https://www.novascotia.ca/factsheet-poweroff.pdf)

Dispose of raw vegetables or fruits that have ash or soot residue.

Check the rest of the food in your home, including canned goods and dry goods like flour, sugar, and spices, and throw it out if it:

- has spoiled, even if your fridge stayed at 4C (40F) at all times
- was open
- got damaged by fire or smoke, even if the package isn't open
- was stored in containers with tiny holes (porous) like cardboard or foam containers
- is in can that is bulging, rusted, or dented

Clean and disinfect all canned foods before opening them to make sure you don't contaminate the food.

Don't eat fruits and vegetables that were growing in your garden during the fire. If you are in doubt, throw it out.

### **Air circulation in the home**

Get the air moving inside your house by using a fan and opening your windows. Only do this if there's no smoke or air quality advisory for your area. Learn more about smoke and air quality advisories.

To help with clean air circulation in your home, you can also:

- Replace your furnace filter. You may need to do this more often than usual due to construction and cleaning activities in your home or neighbourhood. Check your filter often.
- Upgrade furnace filters to the highest efficiency your ventilation system can handle. They may help lower the levels of particles in the air in your home.
- Have your ducts and air conditioning system cleaned by a professional.
- Use a portable air cleaner, if you have one, with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter to remove small particles. For air cleaners, follow all the manufacturer's instructions for changing the filter, where to place the device, and the size of room it's meant to be used in.

Demolition activities are more likely to produce airborne ash. When these activities are happening:

- Stay indoors.
- Close all outer doors and windows.
- Turn off the ventilation for air conditioners and furnaces as much as possible. The use of heat pumps is ok as they do not bring outside air to the indoor space.

### **Safety in cleaning up smoke damage, ash, and soot**

It is recommended to contract a professional qualified in disaster clean up. If you will be doing the cleaning, wear the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) including masks, gloves, and boots.

- **Follow your local guidelines to find out how to dispose of household hazardous and special waste.** These items could include cleaners, pesticides and herbicides, solvents and thinners, aerosol cans containing hazardous substances. These materials should be kept in their original container or a container that is compatible and delivered to a household special waste depot.
- Wash all surfaces inside your home with mild detergent or an appropriate cleaning solution and rinse thoroughly. Clean any place where there's ash, dust, or the smell of fire. Wash the inside of closets, cupboards, and drawers.
- Use wet wiping or mopping. This is safer and better than dry or dust mopping, which can move ash and debris around your house.
- Only vacuum with a unit that has a HEPA filter that can catch ash particles. Using unfiltered vacuums will just move the ash around your house. Change your HEPA filter often.
- Wash and clean all ash-contaminated household items with mild detergent. Change the water often.
- If smoke odours persist, contact a professional cleaning company.
- Wash or dry clean all your clothing and household linens that have been affected by the fire. You may have to run many rinse cycles to get out all the ash, soot, and smoke.

## **Deceased Pets/Animals**

In the very unfortunate circumstance where a family pet or animals (wildlife/domestic farm, etc.) have been lost, the risk to humans from contact with animal remains is low if proper precautions are taken.

- Practice proper hand washing and utilize personal protective equipment such as latex gloves when handling the remains.
- Secure and remove the remains to avoid attracting other animals or pests.
- Contact your veterinarian or municipality for proper handling of the remains.

## **Well Water Safety**

If you are returning home to an area evacuated because of the wildfires and there was no fire damage or fire fighting near you:

- Drink water from an alternate safe source (bottled water) until you have confirmed your water is safe. You can use water for flushing toilets and cleaning.
- Flush your well following the steps in the link. It is recommended that you test for bacteria and chemistry. <https://novascotia.ca/alerts/docs/using-well-water-after-wildfire.pdf>

If the water has unusual smells or colours after you have flushed and disinfected your well, or if test shows bacteria or chemicals in your well, continue to drink bottled water and contact your local Environment and Climate Change Office for advice.

For additional information on well safety after a wildfire, please see the Nova Scotia link below on using well water after a wildfire.

## **Mental Health**

Fires can lead to significant emotional and physical distress, even after safety is reached. Individuals and families may go through several stages of emotions with the daily life disruptions. For assistance and information with respect to mental health please see the resource links below.

## **Resources:**

### **Nova Scotia Health Authority – Mental Health Services**

<https://www.nshealth.ca/news/nova-scotia-health-mental-health-and-addictions-supports-residents>

### **Nova Scotia Wildfires – how to talk to children and youth**

<https://www.iwk.nshealth.ca/wildfires>

### **Air Quality Health Index and Advisories:**

[Nova Scotia - Air Quality Health Index \(AQHI\) - Environment Canada \(weather.gc.ca\)](#)[Air Quality Alerts - Environment Canada](#)

### **NS Smoke and Air Quality:**

[wildfires-air-quality-en.pdf \(novascotia.ca\)](#)

### **NS Saving foods when the power is off:**

[factsheet-poweroff.pdf \(novascotia.ca\)](#)

[factsheet-poweroff-FR.pdf \(novascotia.ca\)](#)

### **NS Using well water after a wildfire:**

<https://novascotia.ca/alerts/docs/using-well-water-after-wildfire.pdf>

### **Well water safety after a wildfire:**

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/wildfire-its-effects-drinking-water-quality>

### **Alberta wildfire resources:**

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/news/Page14070.aspx>