

County of Santa Clara

Department of Environmental Health

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Safety When Returning to Your Home or Business after a Fire

A structure fire can cause serious damage, and in some cases a total loss. The building and many of the items in your home or business may have been badly damaged by flames, heat, smoke, and water.

You may find things that the fire did not burn up but are now ruined by smoke and soggy with water used to put out the flames. Anything that you want to save or reuse will need to be properly cleaned.

Firefighters may have cut holes in the walls of the building to look for hidden flames. They may have cut holes in the roof to let out heat and smoke. Cleanup will take time and patience.

General Safety Tips: **USE CAUTION!**

- Wear sturdy shoes (steel toes and shanks are recommended), a face mask, and clothing.
- Hazardous chemicals and conditions may be present.
- Inspect propane tanks for visible damage before turning on.
- Wear protective gear when sorting through possessions. Anything in contact with ash should be cleaned and sanitized. Sorting through/cleaning burn debris is not recommended for health reasons.
- Be aware of slip, trip, fall, and puncture hazards.

It is important to understand the risk to your safety and health even after the fire is out. The ash and dirty water left behind could make you ill.

Be very careful if you touch any fire-damaged items. Ask the advice of the fire department, local building officials, your insurance agent, and restoration specialists before starting to clean or make repairs.

Do not eat, drink, or breathe in anything that has been near the flames, smoke, ash, or water used to put the fire out.

Safety

Fire ash may be irritating to the skin, nose, and throat and may cause coughing and/or nose bleeds. Fine particles can be inhaled deeply into lungs and may aggravate asthma and may make it difficult to breathe.

- Refrain from cleaning ash and fire debris until professional hazardous waste cleanup services are secured. Seek professional damage and debris removal/restoration services.
- When exposure to dust or ash cannot be avoided, use a well-fitted NIOSH-certified air-purifying respirator N-95 mask.
- Children should not be in the vicinity while cleanup is in progress. Even if care is exercised, it is easy to stir up ash that may contain hazardous substances.
- Clean ash off house pets and other domesticated animals if they have been in contaminated areas.
- It is best to not allow pets in these areas due to the potential risk to their health and their ability to spread outside of affected areas.
- Wear gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants to avoid skin contact. Goggles are recommended. Contact with wet ash may cause chemical burns or irritation on skin. Change your shoes and clothing prior to leaving the decontamination site, to avoid tracking ash into your car, home, etc.

Water

Do not use your water if you suspect or have been told it is contaminated to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash and prepare food, wash your hands, make ice, or make baby formula. Safe water for drinking, cooking, and personal hygiene includes bottled, boiled, or treated water.

If you have a private drinking water well, contact the Department of Environmental Health for advice on using your well water, or visit:

<https://www.sccgov.org/sites/cpd/programs/disaster/Pages/fire.aspx>

Handwashing

Keeping hands clean during an emergency helps prevent the spread of germs. If your tap water is not safe to use, wash your hands with soap and water that has been boiled or disinfected or use a large water jug that contains clean water.

To wash your hands properly:

- Wet your hands with clean, running water and apply soap.
- Rub your hands together (20 seconds) to make a lather and scrub them well.
- Rinse your hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.

If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

Food Safety

Foods exposed to fire can be compromised. Reheating food that has become contaminated will not make it safe - [When In Doubt, Throw It Out!!](#)

Food in cans, jars, bottles, and other permeable containers may appear to be okay, but if they have been close to the heat of a fire, they may no longer be safe. Heat from a fire can activate food spoilage bacteria. If the heat is extreme, the cans or jars themselves can split or rupture, rendering the food unsafe.

Foods that are exposed to toxic fumes and chemicals should be thrown away. Toxic fumes can permeate the packaging and contaminate the food. Any type of food stored in permeable packaging (cardboard, plastic wrap, etc.) should be thrown away. Discard any raw foods stored outside the refrigerator such as potatoes or fruit that could be contaminated by fumes.

Food stored in refrigerators or freezers can also become contaminated by fumes. Chemicals used to fight fires contain toxic materials and can contaminate food and cookware.

Food facilities need to seek Environmental Health assistance prior to reopening your facility.

Contact Environmental Health at 408-918-3400.

Cleaning and Sanitizing

Cleaning and sanitizing your household after an emergency is important to help prevent the spread of illness and disease.

Cleaning and sanitizing surfaces in a four-step process:

- Wash with soap and hot, clean water.
- Rinse with clean water.
- Sanitize by immersing for 1 minute in a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented household chlorine bleach in 1 gallon of clean water. This will provide a solution of 100 – 200 ppm chlorine which is suitable for sanitizing all food contact services, canned foods and equipment.
- Allow to air dry.

Please remember the following safety tips when cleaning:

- Never mix bleach with ammonia or any other cleaner.
- Wear rubber or other non-porous boots, gloves, and eye protection.
- Try not to breathe in product fumes. If using products indoors, open windows and doors to allow fresh air to enter.

If you have any questions, please contact:

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