



News Release

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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State Public Health Officer Urges Avoiding Breathing Wildfire Smoke

SACRAMENTO - California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Director and State Public Health Officer Dr. Karen Smith today advised residents where wildfires have been burning in Southern California, along with people in the smoke's path, to stay indoors and reduce outdoor activity.

“Smoke from wildfires can cause eye and lung irritation. Breathing smoke can also make asthma symptoms worse. People with underlying lung or heart problems should limit their exposure by staying indoors,” said Dr. Smith. “Heavy smoke exposure can also cause more serious disorders, including reduced lung function and bronchitis.”

People who must be outdoors for long periods, in areas with heavy smoke, or where ash is disturbed, should wear an N95 respirator mask. Since wearing a respirator can make it harder to breathe, those with lung or heart problems should ask their doctor before using one. For more information on the [use of particulate respirators \(masks\) to protect from wildfire smoke or ash, please visit CDPH's website.](#)

When it is safe for residents to return home, caution should be used during the clean-up process. 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.

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.

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](#), [wildfire recovery](#) and [worker safety in wildfire regions](#).

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