

After a Wildfire

Personal Safety Concerns on Re-Entry

Following a wildfire, your practice may be affected by smoke, soot and ash, chemicals, structural damage, and water damage.

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 your property safely, be very careful. Take basic precautions and be aware of hazards to your health and safety.

Potential Hazards

- Slip, trip, and fall hazards from unstable structures, open pits, or wet and slippery surfaces
- Sharp objects such as nails, metal, concrete, or wood debris
- Ash, soot, and demolition dust
- Hazardous materials such as janitorial and cleaning products, paint, batteries, and fuel containers which have been partially damaged or destroyed.
- Confined or poorly ventilated areas where carbon monoxide may be present from the operation of pumps, generators, or pressure washers. **Do not enter tight spaces.**
- Pesticides or herbicide containers potentially damaged or destroyed.
- Propane cylinders for heating.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Use appropriate PPE when entering any facility.

Breathing protection:

Use NIOSH 95 (N95) rated protective masks to filter out and reduce exposure to fine dust particles such as ash and soot. These masks, when properly fitted, are more effective than dust masks or surgical masks.

Consider that masks can increase physical stress on a person by making it more difficult to breathe.

If N95 masks are not available, a well-fitting dust mask may provide some protection during cleanup.

Protective clothing, gloves, and boots:

Select “head-to-toe” protection and consider durability including cut, puncture, abrasion, and slip resistance.

At minimum, wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants, or coveralls, leather gloves, and boots with thick soles to prevent punctures from sharp objects.

Eye, face, and head protection:

Wear safety glasses or goggles which provide wrap-around protection. Regular sunglasses are not sufficient protection.

Protective helmets or hard hats are recommended for clean-up of areas where there is a risk of falling debris due to structural damage.

Hearing protection:

Ear plugs or safety ear defenders should be used when operating heavy machinery or power tools.

Fire Retardants, Soot, Ash, and Smoke

Fire retardant helps to slow down the fire. It contains ammonia which can:

- sting your eyes, cuts, scratches, or sunburnt skin
- irritate your skin
- cause coughing or wheezing
- cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea (if swallowed)

Soot and ash can irritate your eyes and skin or cause breathing problems. These symptoms may be worse depending on the type of soot or ash, how long you're exposed, and if you already have a lung condition.

Smoke can irritate the skin, nose, throat, lungs, and eyes. It can also cause coughing and wheezing.

If you have irritated eyes and skin, flush them thoroughly with water. You can use a gentle soap solution on your skin if you contact fire retardant, soot, ash, or smoke.

If you have difficulty breathing, like coughing and wheezing, move away from the area and get medical help right away. Take your prescription inhalers as directed.

Air Quality

Healthy adults can consider returning to their community when the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) is 6 or less, and favorable wind and weather conditions exist that minimize smoke entering the community.

At-risk individuals may want to delay their return until the AQHI is regularly 3 or less. At-risk individuals include:

- Individuals with respiratory conditions (such as COPD and asthma)
- Individuals with existing cardiovascular conditions (such as angina, previous heart attack)
- Pregnant women
- Children who are seven years old and younger
- Seniors (65 years of age and older)