



## BUILDING FIRE ASH HEALTH INFORMATION

All persons accessing burned structures should be aware of the potential hazards associated with those sites. Cleanup efforts at these sites may expose you to ash, soot, and fire decomposition products that can cause health effects including, but not limited to, eye/skin/respiratory irritation. If possible, try to **AVOID** direct contact with ash. If you get ash on your skin, in your eyes, or in your mouth, wash it off as soon as you can, with clean or sterile water. **We do not advise ash clean-up while ash is still falling, and the situation is unpredictable.** Wait until conditions improve.

Ash from burned structures is generally more hazardous than forest ash. For these reasons, it is advisable to be cautious and avoid any unnecessary exposure to the ash.

- Avoid doing activities that stir up 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.
- Wear a tight fitting N95 respirator mask, gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants when cleaning up ash.
- Avoid getting ash into the air as much as possible. Avoid sweeping it up dry. Use water and wet cloth or mop to clean items and surfaces.
- Under any circumstances, **DO NOT USE LEAF BLOWERS!**

**Health Effects of Ash:** 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 make it difficult to breathe. Fire ash contains microscopic particles (dust, dirt, soot) that can be deposited on indoor and outdoor surfaces and can also be inhaled if the ash becomes airborne. Unless tested, the ash is not classified as a hazardous waste, however it may contain traces of hazardous chemicals such as metals (lead, cadmium, nickel and arsenic), asbestos (from older homes or other buildings), perfluorochemicals (from degradation of non-stick cookware), flame retardants, and caustic materials. If the ash contains asbestos, nickel, arsenic or cadmium, then exposure is a particular concern because these substances can cause cancer. Because the substances in the ash vary, it is always best to be cautious. Some wet ash can cause chemical burns or skin irritation.

**Sensitive People:** People with asthma or other lung diseases, pregnant women, and the elderly or very young should exercise special caution because they may be more susceptible to health effects from the ash.

**Children:** 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. In addition, the exploratory behavior of children may result in direct contact with contaminated materials.

**Pets:** Clean ash off house pets and other domesticated animals if they have been in contaminated areas. However, 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 contaminated areas.

**Clothing:** Covering clothing is recommended when in proximity to ash. Goggles are recommended. Change your shoes and clothing prior to leaving the decontamination site, to avoid tracking ash into your car, home, etc.

**Masks:** When exposure to dust or ash cannot be avoided, use a well-fitted NIOSH-certified air-purifying respirator mask. This type of mask can be purchased from most hardware stores. A mask rated N-95 is much more effective than unrated dust- or surgical-masks in blocking ash particles. Although smaller sized masks may appear to fit a child's face, manufacturers do not recommend their use for children. If your child is in an area that warrants wearing a mask, you should remove them from that area to an environment with cleaner air. Persons with heart or lung disease should consult their physician before using a mask during post-fire cleanup.

If you have symptoms that may be related to exposure to smoke or soot, consult your doctor. Symptoms include repeated coughing, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing, wheezing, chest tightness or pain, palpitations, headaches and nausea or unusual fatigue or lightheadedness.