



FAQ: Smoke Damage After a Megafire



FIRE IMPACT & GENERAL SAFETY

Q: What areas are typically affected after a megafire?

A: Fires can devastate thousands of acres and displace tens of thousands of residents. Beyond direct fire damage, smoke, soot, and ash can affect areas miles away—including cities not in the immediate burn zone.

Q: Is it safe to return home once the flames are gone?

A: Not necessarily. Smoke residues, chemical contaminants, and ash can remain hazardous long after the fire is out. These residues can linger indoors and pose health risks if they are not properly addressed.



AIR QUALITY & HEALTH

Q: How do I monitor air quality?

A: Use apps like **AirNow** and **IQAir** to check real-time air quality. Look for PM2.5 levels and ozone concentration but remember they don't capture all toxins from urban wildfires.

Q: Who is most at risk?

A:

- Children
- Elderly
- Pregnant individuals
- Those with asthma, COPD, or cardiovascular disease
- Anyone cleaning ash or living near the fire zone

Q: What are the short- and long-term health effects of smoke exposure?

A:

- **Short-term:** Irritated eyes, sore throat, coughing, shortness of breath, asthma flare-ups

19201 SONOMA HWY #224, S O N O M A, CA 95476 | www.afterthefireusa.org | 707-953-6034

After the Fire USA is an initiative of Rebuild Northbay Foundation, a registered nonprofit (501c3 & 501c4). We help communities navigate wildfires across the American West. We collaborate with public officials (regional, state and federal), private sector, nonprofit community, and support community led and designed recovery.

- **Long-term:** Decreased lung function, heart issues, cognitive impacts in children, cancer risks from toxins like dioxins and heavy metals
-

PROTECTION & PPE

Q: What kind of masks should I wear?

A:

- Use **N95 or KN95** for general protection
- Use **P100 or VOC cartridge respirators** for cleanup or heavy exposure
- Avoid cloth masks and surgical masks—they are not sufficient for particulates or toxins

Q: What other personal protective equipment (PPE) should I use?

A:

- Goggles or sealed eye protection
 - Gloves (nitrile or heavy-duty)
 - Long sleeves, pants, and boots
 - Never dry sweep ash; use wet methods or HEPA vacuums
-

RETURNING HOME & CLEANUP

Q: How do I know if it's safe to re-enter my home?

A:

- Perform a **visual and smell test**
- Look for soot webs, discoloration, and residue trails
- If unsure, get a professional **Certified Industrial Hygienist (CIH)** assessment

Q: Should I clean my home myself?

A:

- Only if damage is minor and you have the right PPE and equipment
- Hire professionals for moderate to severe contamination
- NEVER dry vacuum or sweep soot—use **HEPA vacuums**, dry chem sponges, and mild detergent with disposable microfiber cloths

19201 SONOMA HWY #224, S O N O M A, CA 95476 | www.afterthefireusa.org | 707-953-6034

After the Fire USA is an initiative of Rebuild Northbay Foundation, a registered nonprofit (501c3 & 501c4). We help communities navigate wildfires across the American West. We collaborate with public officials (regional, state and federal), private sector, nonprofit community, and support community led and designed recovery.

Q: How should I clean HVAC systems?

A:

- Change HVAC filters to **MERV 13 or higher**
 - Run systems on **fan mode with closed windows** for 1–2 days before reoccupying
 - Consider professional duct cleaning for heavily impacted systems
-



AIR FILTRATION

Q: What kind of air filters or purifiers should I use?

A:

- Use **HEPA-certified air purifiers**, ideally **CARB-certified** to avoid ozone emission
- Supplement HVAC with **MERV 13–16 filters**
- Add activated carbon filters for VOCs

Q: Where should I place air purifiers?

A: Near sleeping areas or vulnerable individuals to prioritize clean air where it's needed most.



CLOTHING, TOYS & FURNITURE

Q: Can I keep clothes or toys exposed to smoke?

A:

- Wash clothes with odor-free detergent in hot water
 - Stuffed toys and soft furniture should be discarded if visibly soiled or smoky
 - Hard-surface toys can be cleaned with mild soap and water
-



INSURANCE & CONTRACTORS

Q: Should I get an industrial hygienist report?

A: Absolutely. This report:

19201 SONOMA HWY #224, S O N O M A, CA 95476 | www.afterthefireusa.org | 707-953-6034

After the Fire USA is an initiative of Rebuild Northbay Foundation, a registered nonprofit (501c3 & 501c4). We help communities navigate wildfires across the American West. We collaborate with public officials (regional, state and federal), private sector, nonprofit community, and support community led and designed recovery.

- Provides proof of contamination
- Guides cleanup protocols
- Supports insurance claims and real estate disclosures

Q: Will insurance cover the cleanup?

A: It varies. Some insurers will pay for industrial hygiene assessments and cleanup—others will not unless you **demand it explicitly**.

Q: What should I ask a restoration contractor?

A:

- Are you working with a **Certified Industrial Hygienist (CIH)**?
- Do you follow a written work plan with testing before/after?
- Do you use **HEPA vacuums, VOC filters**, and proper PPE?
- Avoid contractors who only fog or mask odors without real cleanup

DIY CLEANING CHECKLIST

- ✓ Use HEPA vacuum and soft bristle brush
- ✓ Use dry chem sponges first on porous items
- ✓ Wet wipe with mild, non-toxic detergent
- ✓ Change HVAC filters regularly
- ✓ Don't forget attic, crawlspace, and vents
- ✓ Seal off unused areas to avoid cross-contamination
- ✓ Clean shoes and pet paws before entering

ASH & DEBRIS REMOVAL

Q: Is ash hazardous?

A: Yes. Ash may contain lead, asbestos, arsenic, and dioxins—it is considered **hazardous waste** under California law.

Q: Can I remove ash from my yard?

A: Not recommended. Wait for **FEMA or certified hazmat contractors**. Using leaf blowers or sweeping spreads contamination.

MOVING FORWARD

19201 SONOMA HWY #224, S O N O M A, CA 95476 | www.afterthefireusa.org | 707-953-6034

After the Fire USA is an initiative of Rebuild Northbay Foundation, a registered nonprofit (501c3 & 501c4). We help communities navigate wildfires across the American West. We collaborate with public officials (regional, state and federal), private sector, nonprofit community, and support community led and designed recovery.



Q: How long will recovery take?

A:

- Outdoor debris cleanup can take **9–12 months**
- Safe indoor occupancy depends on cleanup thoroughness
- Rain and time will help, but indoor residues must be manually removed

Q: What resources are available?

A:

- FEMA and state emergency relief funds
 - Community grants for uninsured households
 - American Industrial Hygiene Association: <https://www.aiha.org>
-

19201 SONOMA HWY #224, S O N O M A, CA 95476 | www.afterthefireusa.org | 707-953-6034

After the Fire USA is an initiative of Rebuild Northbay Foundation, a registered nonprofit (501c3 & 501c4). We help communities navigate wildfires across the American West. We collaborate with public officials (regional, state and federal), private sector, nonprofit community, and support community led and designed recovery.

EIN/TAX ID: 82-3266893