

Returning to Your Home after a Wildfire

Protect yourself and your family

1. Re-enter your home safely

Return to your home only once your local authorities have said it's safe to do so.

- Try to return to your property during daylight hours.
- Follow all municipal directions for utility and security precautions
- If you or any of your family members have breathing difficulties or asthma, take all appropriate precautions to protect yourself.
 - Call Health Link at 811 for health advice, or consult your family physician for any required medications or extra precautions you may need at this time.
 - Lingering smoke and fire ash at your home and yard can temporarily worsen your personal respiratory issues.

2. Wildfire Smoke and Your Health

When smoke from a plant-based fire (e.g., forest fire, grassland fire) enters a community, it can often cause problems for the people who live there. The biggest health risk comes from small particles in the smoke. These particles can get in the eyes and respiratory system, which can cause burning eyes, a runny nose, coughing, or illnesses like bronchitis. If you have a heart or lung problem, these small particles can make it worse.

When an air quality advisory is in effect, all individuals living in or travelling within the affected area are advised to be aware of potential health concerns that can be associated with poor air quality conditions, and take precautions to reduce exposure and risk. Follow the air quality advisory recommendations, such as:

- Close all outside windows and doors, including attached garage doors. If the air quality gets better for a short time, air out your house by opening doors and windows to circulate fresh air.
- Turn down furnace thermostats and furnace fans to the minimum setting. Do not attempt to extinguish pilot light.
- If you have an air-conditioner, keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside.
- Avoid running fans, such as “whole-house fans” or “fresh air ventilation systems”, that bring more smoky outdoor air inside. If you have central air conditioning, set it to recirculate. Keep it running to help filter the air and keep your family cool.
- Switch all floor registers to their closed position.
- Close fire place dampers on wood burning fireplaces.
- Do not use wood burning fireplace, wood stove or other smoke-producing appliances or features, including candles.

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- If you must drive to another location, keep windows and vents closed. Run car fans on recirculate mode to avoid drawing in outdoor air.
- Reduce levels of physical activity as necessary, especially outdoors, to decrease the inhalation of airborne pollutants.
- Do not smoke tobacco – smoking puts added stress on your lungs and those around you.
- Residents are reminded not to use backyard fire pits or fire boxes in parks when the air quality risk is high or very high.

Individuals with respiratory conditions (such as COPD and asthma), and individuals with existing cardiovascular conditions (such as angina, previous heart attack and congestive heart failure), may notice a worsening of symptoms, due to poor air quality conditions. Children and elderly are also at higher risk of smoke-related illness. These individuals should monitor for worsening of symptoms and take the precautions routinely recommended by their physicians if a worsening of symptoms occurs. Individuals experiencing symptoms can also call Health Link at 811 to speak to a registered nurse.

Can I still be active during poor air quality events?

- When outside, don't do any strenuous activity or exercise. This is because when you exercise and do strenuous activity, you often breathe 10 to 20 times more than you do while you are resting. Stop what you are doing if you experience health symptoms from smoke exposure.
- Drink lots of water to stay hydrated. This will keep your nose and mouth moist, which makes it easier to breathe. This is important when you're inside and outside.
- If you have chest tightness, chest pain, or shortness of breath, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Links to more information:

- AHS Wildfire Smoke and Health: <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/wildfire-smoke-health.aspx>
- Smoke Forecasts: <http://firesmoke.ca/forecasts/current/>
- Alberta Wildfire: <http://wildfire.alberta.ca/>
- Air Quality Health Advisories: <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/news/air.aspx>
- Special Air Quality Statements for Alberta: https://weather.gc.ca/warnings/index_e.html?prov=ab

3. Discard items impacted by the power outage

Information provided below is general guidance about discarding perishable foods after a power outage. If you wish to discuss a specific matter, please contact Environmental Public Health at 1-833-476-4743. Food and medicines may have been damaged by the power outage. Before disposing of items, make sure that you inventory those items as part of your insurance claim.

Foods

- Consult with your insurance company to determine the necessary documentation for your insurance claim. Take plenty of photos and write down an inventory of the contents of your refrigerator(s) and freezer(s).
- Due to the extended prior power outage your refrigerator and freezer could contain spoiled foods and/or smell. Refrigerators typically maintain 4°C for four hours during a power loss. Without power and if the doors are kept closed, upright and chest freezers that are completely full can keep foods frozen for up to two days. Half-full freezers can keep foods frozen for one day. Foods will most likely have warmed during the power outage, and returned to normal 4°C (refrigerator) or -18°C (freezer). Although foods appear frozen/cold now, the safest course of action is to discard these foods.
- Discard any spoiled foods, condiments, and sauces, even if the refrigerator maintained 4°C at all times.

Remember that appearance and odour are not good indicators of food safety. Foods that look and smell fine may not be safe to consume.

Be safe. When in doubt, throw it out.

Medications

For insurance purposes, take plenty of photos and write down an inventory of the contents of your medicine cabinets and cupboards.

- Discard any medicine that required refrigeration.
- Follow current local guidelines on where medicines may be discarded.

4. Cleaning Your Refrigerator and Freezer

Spoiled food products may have impacted your refrigerator or freezer. Clean, sanitize, and deodorize your refrigerator and freezer once you have discarded the spoiled food. To do this:

1. First unplug the refrigerator and freezer.
2. Rinse or blow out the coils and compressors on the refrigerator and freezer.
3. To clean the inside, use soap and water and then rinse with clean water.
4. Sanitize the inside with a bleach/water mixture made by mixing 1 teaspoon of ordinary household bleach for every 4 cups of water. Pre-mixed sanitizers can also be purchased locally.
5. Leave the doors of the refrigerator and freezer open to help them dry out.
6. Once the appliance is dry, reconnect the power.
7. Wait until the inside temperature of your refrigerator has reached 4°C before restocking it with food.
8. Wait until your freezer temperature is at -18°C before restocking it with food.

5. Review your insurance information or other options

If you are insured:

- Work with your insurance company agent to find out what is covered, what is not covered and what may be subject to further discussion. The sooner the insurance company is notified, the quicker your insurance claim can be processed.
- Take plenty of pictures of the damage to your home and property. This will help with your insurance claim.

If you are not insured:

Check with your local, private service organizations to see what help you may be eligible for:

- Canadian Red Cross
- Salvation Army
- Local religious organizations
- Provincial or municipal emergency social services
- Non-profit crisis centres
- Your municipal emergency coordination

6. Repair Water Damage

If your home was damaged by any water while you were gone, such as a leaking water pipe or toilet, you will need to get rid of all excess water to prevent potential for mold growth. If you discover a small amount of mold (typically under 10 square feet), and you wish to complete the work yourself, more information is available here: <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/AlbertaDocuments/mould-remediation-private-homes.pdf>

Where water damage may be extensive, consult with your insurance company to determine the necessary documentation for your insurance claim.

For more information, please contact Environmental Public Health: 1-833-476-4743.

Environmental Public Health Website: <https://www.ahs.ca/eph>