Health risks from smoke and ash

Smoke can be a health hazard. Fine particles in soot and ash can irritate lungs and skin. Soot and ash can settle on surfaces around your home and garden for several days after the fire has been extinguished. Fire retardants and foam from firefighting may also be present.

Smoke and ash inhalation can be dangerous

Smoke may irritate your eyes, nose, throat and airways. Symptoms can include runny or sore eyes, dry or sore throat, sore nose, cough, tightness of chest or difficulty breathing. Most people's symptoms disappear soon after their smoke exposure ends, causing no long-term health problems.

If you are in an area where you can see or smell smoke or have received an emergency alert, you should:

- follow the advice of emergency services and leave the area if this is required
- remain indoors and shut your windows and doors (if you are safe to stay in the area)
- turn off your air conditioning or switch to 'recirculate'
- keep pets inside with clean water, food and bedding.

Some people are more at risk from smoke and ash inhalation:

- elderly or pregnant people
- babies and young children
- people with heart or lung conditions like asthma or heart disease.

These people should stay indoors until the smoke has cleared. They should avoid any clean-up of ash and soot around the home if possible.

Breathing in fine particles of ash or soot can worsen pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma and heart disease. Please continue to take any medications for these conditions.

If you experience shortness of breath, wheezing, asthma or chest pain, please see your doctor immediately or call 111. For health advice you can also contact Healthline for free anytime on 0800 611 116.

Ash and soot can contaminate water and food

If your drinking water comes from tanks

- If you are not on Council water supply, you will need to check your roof and rainwater storage tanks for ash, debris, fire retardants and foam.
- You should disconnect the downpipe to the water tanks if you see any evidence (or there is risk of) ash, debris, retardants or foam, as this will contaminate your water supply. If you need assistance with taking these measures, contact family (whānau), neighbours, volunteers or your local Civil Defence.
- If you find ash in your water tank or the water has an unusual taste, odour or appearance (possibly a sign of retardants or foam) don't use the water for drinking, food preparation, cleaning teeth, washing or for pets.
- Disinfecting or boiling the water will not remove ash, retardants or foam.
- Water runoff after fires might contaminate streams, rivers, lakes and groundwater supplies.
- Use bottled water or saved water as an alternative safe supply.
- Do not reconnect the downpipe until a good flush of rain has cleaned the roof, or the roof has been hosed down.
- Contaminated water can be used to flush toilets.

For advice on making water supplies safe following a fire, visit taumataarowai.govt.nz/wildfires

Food safety

- Wash fruit and vegetables from your garden with safe drinking water before cooking them or eating them raw. Do not use rainwater from a tank if you suspect it has been contaminated.

Cleaning up

If your home or community has been affected by smoke, take steps to clean up ash and soot safely.

- Wear a N95 or P2 mask if you have one (from a hardware or health and safety shop), otherwise wear a surgical mask.
- Wear gloves, a long-sleeved shirt and long pants to avoid skin contact.
- Wash your hands regularly, particularly after clean-up and before eating.
- To keep children safe, they should not be involved in any clean up.
- Consider using a professional cleaner if a home or building is heavily contaminated with ash, soot or smoke. If you have insurance, check your policy to see what is covered before you start cleaning up.

Cleaning up ash inside your home

- Wash hard surfaces, toys, food preparation areas, pet food and water bowls and any cooking utensils that were exposed to the fire. Use hot water and detergent.
- Wipe any visible soot or dust (for example, on windowsills) using a damp cloth or mop with detergent.
- Vacuum clean carpets and upholstery, preferably using a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter.
- Clean air conditioning unit filters or ventilation systems or ask your property manager to do this.
- Clothing exposed to smoke should be washed.

Cleaning up ash outside your home

- Hose down ash and debris from your roof, exterior walls and outdoor surfaces.
- Remove large pieces of debris with gloves, ensuring the debris is cool before placing it in the bin.
- Clean filters and covers of outdoor pools.

Look after yourself and others

- If you feel unwell, contact your doctor or call **Healthline** for free on **0800 611 116**.
- You and your whānau may experience a range of emotions, including shock, fear and anger. If you need to talk, call free or text **1737** anytime. For more advice, visit: healthnz.govt.nz/StressEmergencyEvent
- Help vulnerable people like the elderly.
- A dedicated Disability Helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to support disabled people. Call free on **0800 11 12 13** or text **8988** for help and information.

For more information

- Restoring your property after fire: fireandemergency.nz/home-fire-safety/in-the-event-of-a-fire/restoring-your-property/
- Drinking water information in an emergency: taumataarowai.govt.nz/incidents-and-emergencies
- If you are feeling stressed or anxious, you can text or phone 1737 anytime to speak to a trained counsellor for free.
- Visit healthnz.govt.nz/fires-smoke

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This resource is available from healthed.govt.nz or the Authorised Provider in your local health district

Health New Zealand
Te Whatu Ora