



Recovering after a wildfire



If you are evacuated, you'll be anxious to return home, but only do so when officials say it's safe. They may identify a specific route or routes. Follow all directions and avoid taking shortcuts.

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Re-entering your home or business

Your home and its surroundings may not look like they did before you left. As you arrive, it's important to obey all signage and understand Damage Assessment Placards. Damage Assessment Placards are notices that the local government places on buildings within the damaged area. They tell you whether a structure is suitable for re-entry, if access is restricted or if it is unsafe to enter. Visit [BC Housing](#) for more information on placards.

If you can only enter your home once, remove your valuables and take steps to secure your property.

If you're safely able to return for longer

- Bring supplies like a flashlight, tools, drinking water, gloves, garbage bags and a first aid kit
- Walk around the perimeter of any structure before entering, noting electrical wiring, any gas smell or debris that could fall, and photographing damage

- Don't turn power or gas back on until the equipment has been inspected by a licensed gas or electrical contractor. Find one using [Technical Safety BC's find a licensed contractor tool](#).
- Enter with caution and check that the main power breaker is off
- Only use generators outdoors; do not connect to a household circuit
- Note sewage and water damage; your septic system or sump pump may not work without power and water may not be potable (that is, may not be safe to consume)
- Do not use your sewage disposal system unless you know it's capable of handling waste
- If using propane, gas or heating oil, contact suppliers for inspection and service

Take pictures, keep track of your expenses and the time you spend cleaning up and make sure you keep your receipts.

Fire retardant

Water-soluble fire retardants are commonly used in fire suppression. Retardant is typically coloured red with an iron oxide (rust) mixture to increase its visibility for air crews and ground personnel.

If retardant lands on houses or cars it can easily be washed off with water. If the retardant is dry, removal may require some scrubbing with water or power washing and a mild detergent.

Tip: Wildfire activity may increase the likelihood for natural landslides and flooding. Learn about warning signs in the [Landslide and Flooding Risks brochure \(PDF, 1.23MB\)](#) and [companion sign \(PDF, 3.33MB\)](#).

Food and water safety

Be sure to photograph food that you discard, it may be required for insurance purposes. Contact your insurance provider for specific requirements. Follow your current local guidelines on where to discard food waste.

Water: Do not drink, prepare food, or wash with tap water until officials say the water source is safe. Use bottled water, or boil or disinfect tap water with tablets (or chlorine bleach for non-drinking needs). If you are on a well or cistern that has been damaged, assume the water is not safe to drink. Contact your local authority for instructions.

Refrigerated food: Discard food that is spoiled, as well as food that has been stored in a refrigerator that has lost power, even if the power has been restored. **When in doubt, throw it out.**

Frozen food: Discard food that's thawed. If your freezer has been exposed to fire, or has been without power for more than three days, throw out the contents.

Canned food: Tinned goods should be safe, unless the can has bulged, rusted or is badly dented. Undamaged canned goods should be washed and disinfected if they've been exposed to smoke. Food in glass jars exposed to heat should be thrown out as seals may have broken.

What else to discard: Discard food and items exposed to heat, ash, chemicals, soot, water and smoke

including

- Food stored in cupboards, drawers, containers and open food
- Packaged food, including paper, cardboard boxes, plastic, cellophane
- Bottles and jars of food with screw top lids or crown/crimp caps
- Single service items and utensils which also includes individually plastic-wrapped items

Clean and repair your home

Your insurance policy may cover house cleaning by a fire restoration specialist. If you are going to clean your residence yourself:

- Wear gloves and goggles, keep children and pets away, and ventilate the area you're cleaning well
- Smoke odours can last a long time, and you may need to clean everything several times
- Vacuum all surfaces, change heating and air conditioning filters, and have ducts cleaned
- Soot/smoke can be removed from painted walls with trisodium phosphate, but wallpaper may not be salvageable
- Clean dirt off furniture, removing drawers and scrubbing wooden surfaces; let dry thoroughly
- Linoleum flooring may require replacement, but wood and carpet can be vacuumed and washed
- Wash fridges and freezers with baking soda/water, vinegar or ammonia to remove odours
- Locks and hinges should be taken apart, thoroughly cleaned and oiled
- Dispose of hazardous materials (like solvents and garden chemicals) if they show signs of damage. Separate hazardous materials from landfill waste and dispose appropriately

Repairing your home

Before beginning repairs on your home, consider the following

- Look for a reputable contractor to help with restoration; get recommendations from friends and neighbours or your insurance adjuster
- Verify the work of any roofer or builder, deal with only licensed contractors. Beware of potential scams
- Check with your local authority about submitting plans and getting a building permit, as needed
- Ask for a written estimate and get a copy of the final, signed contract before the job begins
- Pay only by cheque or credit card – not cash; consider a 'hold back payable post-completion'
- Damage to utilities must be repaired under permit and inspected by the appropriate agency

If you live in a First Nations community, [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada \(INAC\)](#) may be able to help.

Starting the insurance claim process

Call your insurance representative or company. Most insurers have a 24-hour claims service. Be as detailed as possible when providing information.

List all damaged or destroyed items. If possible, assemble proofs of purchase, photos, receipts and warranties. Take photos of damage incurred and keep damaged items, unless they pose a health hazard. Keep all receipts related to clean up and living expenses if you've been displaced. Ask your insurance representative about what expenses you may be entitled to and for how long.

If you do not know the name of your insurer or your insurance representative, contact Insurance Bureau of Canada's Consumer Information Centre at 1-844-2ask-IBC.

TIP: For more information on insurance claims, additional supports, restoration and cleaning, download the [What to do after a fire guide \(PDF\)](#).

Psychological care

Fear and anxiety are natural reactions to stressful events and can stir up past traumas. To help yourself and your loved ones:

- Accept offers of help. Seek counselling or spiritual guidance
- Focus on positive memories and the skills you've used to get through other hard times
- Be aware of how children are reacting. Reassure them and encourage them to express themselves
- Give yourself and your loved ones permission to grieve
- Practice cultural or spiritual customs that bring you comfort

Warning signs

With support, most people recover within a few weeks; however, some will need more time and help to heal. Watch for warning signs of extended anxiety and contact a medical professional or trusted community leader if they last more than two to four weeks:

- Trouble with eating and sleeping
- Feeling depressed or hopeless; showing low energy or crying often
- Being anxious and fearful
- Trouble focusing on daily activities
- Recurring thoughts or nightmares
- Avoiding activities or places that are reminders of the event

Seek help

Don't be afraid to seek help after a traumatic event, such as a wildfire and related evacuation.

- **BC's Mental Health Support Line** is open 24 hours a day at 310-6789 (no area code).
- Counselling is also available through the **First Nations Health Authority**. Visit www.fnha.ca or call the KUU-US Indigenous Crisis Line at 1-800-588-8717.