

Dangerous Debris

Potential Health Risks Associated with Residential Wildfire Debris

After a devastating fire, homeowners are often eager to return to their homes to see what can be recovered. While it is best to contact your local city or county for guidance about entering your property, homeowners should be aware of the immediate and long-term health risks associated with exposure to residential wildfire ash and debris. Whenever possible, residents should avoid or minimize contact with residential wildfire debris.



What Is in Residential Wildfire Debris?

Based on past analysis of homes and structures burned by wildfires, the resulting ash and debris can contain some or all of the following:

- Tiny particles of dust, dirt, and soot that can easily become airborne and inhaled.
- Toxic amounts of heavy metals including arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, and mercury.
- Asbestos.
- Hazardous materials such as propane tanks, air conditioners, batteries, cleaning products, pesticides, and herbicides.

Reducing Your Exposure

While sifting through residential wildfire debris may not be prohibited, for your safety and the safety of others, it is not recommended. In addition to irritating your skin, nose, and throat, substances like asbestos and cadmium have been known to cause cancer. Property owners who want to search debris for possible salvageable items should do so with caution and with proper protective gear.

- Avoid disturbing debris or kicking up ash.
- NIOSH-certified air-purifying respirator masks are highly recommended. A mask rated N-95 is more effective at blocking particles from ash.
- Wear gloves, long shirts and pants, safety eyewear, and other clothing.
- It's best to change shoes and clothing as soon as you are off-site to avoid contaminating your vehicle, your home, or other non-contaminated areas.
- Even with protective clothing and respirators, children should not be exposed to wildfire ash or debris.



<https://caloes.ca.gov/cal-oes-divisions/recovery>

<https://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/Disaster/Wildfires/>