

When Wildfire Threatens

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

More and more people are making their homes in woodland settings – in or near forests, rural areas, or remote mountain sites - areas in which wildfires are more likely to occur. Wildfires often begin unnoticed. They spread quickly, igniting brush, trees, and homes. CDC recommends taking steps before, during, and after local wildfires to reduce the effect they have on your life.

Before wildfires threaten your community, meet with your family to decide what to do and where to go in the event of a wildfire in your area. Make plans to ensure your pet's safety before, during, and after an emergency. Protect your home by keeping flammable materials away from structures. Avoid the build up of flammable materials by cleaning roof surfaces and gutters regularly.

When a wildfire threatens, listen for news reports and evacuation information and always follow the instructions of local officials. If you're advised to evacuate, do so immediately. To protect yourself, wear sturdy shoes, cotton or woolen clothing, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and gloves, and carry a handkerchief to protect your face. Pack the things you'll need to take along. Be sure to take your medications and vital documents, such as your ID and Social Security card. For more information about what you may need, please visit the U.S. Fire Administration's website at www.usfa.dhs.gov.

When evacuating an area threatened by wildfires, avoid traveling through a smoke filled roadway at all costs, as poor visibility on the road can cause crashes, injuries, and even death. If you don't have a plan to ensure your pet's safety and need information quickly in an emergency, contact local animal shelters and the local government animal control agency or other animal service agencies.

Make sure you have enough time to safely evacuate your family before taking steps to protect your home. If your home is in the path of a wildfire and you have time before moving to safety, close your windows, vents, doors, blinds, or non-flammable window coverings. Shut off all utilities, if possible. Open your fireplace damper and close fireplace screens. Move flammable furniture to the center of the house, away from windows and sliding glass doors.

Breathing wildfire smoke can be harmful to your health. The smoke from wildfires is a mixture of gases and fine particles from burning trees and other plant materials. That smoke can irritate your eyes, throat, and lungs and may cause coughing, scratchy throat, shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, stinging eyes, and runny nose. Smoke may worsen symptoms for people who have pre-existing heart and lung conditions, such as respiratory allergies, asthma, congestive heart failure, cardiovascular disease, and angina.

Protect yourself from wildfire smoke by limiting your exposure to the smoke. If you must be outdoors in a smoky area, avoid exertion. Pay attention to local air quality reports and refer to visibility guides, if they're available. If you are advised to stay indoors, keep indoor air as clean as possible. Don't use anything that burns, such as candles, fireplaces, or gas stoves. Don't vacuum either, because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home. Don't smoke, because smoking puts even more pollution into the air. And remember to avoid traveling through smoke on roadways.

Ash from wildfires can also be a health concern. Wildfires can deposit large amounts of ash on indoor and outdoor surfaces in areas near the fire. That ash deposited by wildfires is similar to ash that might be found in your fireplace. Like smoke, ash can be irritating to the nose and throat and may cause coughing. Fire ash may also be irritating to the skin, especially if you have sensitive skin. If you return to your home after the wildfire has ended and it's been damaged, use protective gear, such as gloves, goggles, and N95 masks to protect yourself from the ash and debris.

A common response to a wildfire can include feelings of fear, sadness, or guilt. Sometimes, people have trouble sleeping, or may feel jumpy, irritable, or numb. These symptoms are normal, especially right after the trauma. There are many things you can do to cope with traumatic events. Keep to your usual routine, if possible, and find ways to relax and participate in activities you enjoy. Keep a journal and exercise, but do so indoors if the air quality isn't acceptable. Stay active by volunteering or helping with clean up, if it's safe to do so. Turn to family, friends, or clergy for support, and talk about your experiences and feelings with them. If you feel you or your family needs assistance, contact your local mental health center. For more information, visit www.emergency.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/, that's one word - mentalhealth.

For more information about evacuation plans and prevention tips for wildfires and other disasters, visit CDC's emergency website at www.emergency.cdc.gov and your local health department website or emergency management agency website. You can also call the CDC Hotline at 1-800-CDC-INFO for the latest updates on protecting yourself from wildfires and other disasters.

To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.