

# POST-FIRE PUBLIC HEALTH TIPS & ASH AND DEBRIS CLEANUP GUIDANCE

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Issued by the  
County of San Diego, City of San Diego, and  
San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board

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Recent wildfires in San Diego have left substantial amounts of ash and debris on properties throughout the County. Cleaning up after the fires is an important step in the recovery process and must be done carefully to avoid creating further impacts on public health and pollution.

Public health officials at the County, City, and Regional Water Quality Control Board are providing the following guidelines and directions to assist everyone during the wildfire cleanup effort.

First and foremost, it is important to minimize the amount of ash and debris contained in water runoff that enters our local storm water conveyance system – the gutters, culverts, and ditches leading to our creeks, bays, lagoons and the ocean.

Information about our storm water conveyance system and fire recovery resources are available at:

- County of San Diego Emergency Home Page: <http://www.sdcountyrecovery.com>
- Regional Water Quality Control Board <http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/sandiego/>, and
- City of San Diego “Think Blue” <http://www.thinkblue.org>

Please note that the guidelines and directions included below only apply during the current emergency situation. There are existing requirements regarding discharges to the stormwater conveyance system that apply under normal conditions. Also, since many areas of the County are also under restricted water usage due to the fires, some clean-up efforts may need to be delayed until these restrictions are lifted

## **Important Health Information Regarding Ash Deposits**

Ash deposited on indoor and outdoor surfaces near the fire is relatively non-toxic and is similar to ash that might be found in your fireplace. However, any ash:

- May be irritating to the skin, especially sensitive skin;
- Will contain small amounts of cancer-causing chemicals;
- Can be irritating to the nose and throat if breathed, and may cause coughing; and
- May trigger asthmatic attacks in people who already have asthma.

In order to avoid possible health problems, the following is recommended:

- Do not allow children to play in the ash or with unwashed toys;
- Using a small amount of water during ash clean up will help to limit the redistribution of ash and dust into the air;

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- Clean ash off house pets;
- Wear gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants to avoid skin contact;
- If you get ash on your skin, wash it off as soon as possible;
- Rinse homegrown fruit or vegetables thoroughly before eating them;
- Avoid disseminating ash into the air; do not use leaf blowers or non-HEPA filter vacuums; and
- Wear well-fitting dust masks; those rated N-95 or P-100 provide better protection than simple dust or surgical masks (persons with heart or lung disease should consult a physician before using a mask).

Ash and any debris inside burned structures may contain more toxic substances than forest fire ash because of the many synthetic and other materials present in buildings -- be cautious! Older buildings in particular may contain asbestos and lead.

### **Outdoor Clean-up Guidelines:**

1. Wait until ash has stopped falling before cleaning up. This will limit the number of cleanup efforts needed, which can help reduce the amount of ash exposure and potential runoff contamination.
2. A damp cloth or wet mop may be all that is needed on lightly dusted areas; use as little water as possible. You may also try lightly wetting the area and then sweeping.
3. Where wet cleaning is warranted, try to contain wash water and debris material and prevent it from entering the stormwater conveyance system. Wet clean up methods to consider include:
  - a. Wash ash and debris into landscaped areas wherever possible;
  - b. Dampen accumulated ash and debris and scrape it up or vacuum it up using an adequate filtering vacuum;
  - c. Clean your car by taking it to a car wash, or wash the car over a vegetated area such as your lawn; and
  - d. If washing roof areas, redirect downspouts to landscaped areas.
- 4.. When wash water, ash, and debris can not be contained on site, use as little water as possible and try to filter the wash water before it enters the stormwater conveyance system. You can filter wash water by placing gravel bags, filter fabric, or fiber rolls, in front of storm drains or other discharge points in order to capture ash and debris. Scoop up captured ash and debris, double bag the debris and tie the bag, and dispose of it in your regular trash.

### **Indoor Clean-up Guidelines:**

Minimize re-suspending settled dust when cleaning interior areas by using wet methods or adequate filtering vacuums. Typical household vacuums may pickup and re-suspend settled dust into the air.

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1. For carpets, use of a high efficiency, HEPA-type or water filtered vacuum is recommended.
2. Use a damp cloth to pick-up dust and trap it on the cloth for small horizontal surfaces. Rinse the cloth out in a sink as needed; dispose of the cloth to the trash when it becomes too dirty for continued use.
3. For non-porous surfaces like tile or vinyl floors, use a damp mop to trap the dust. Clean the mop in a sink or bath tub as needed.

### **Debris Disposal:**

1. Double bag the debris and ash into plastic bags or other containers that will prevent it from being redistributed to the environment by wind or rain. Be sure to seal all bags or containers.
2. Collected ash and debris may be disposed of in your regular trash collection.

### **Other Issues:**

1. In addition to the precautions and cleanup methods described above, construction, industrial, and other facilities operating under a permit with the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board should implement their Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plans (SWPPPs), or equivalent plans, to the extent possible when dealing with ash and debris cleanup.
2. If pools, spas, or fountains need to be drained for ash removal, the water should be free of chlorine, debris, and vegetation. For detailed information, please see *Swimming Pools Affected by Smoke and Ash* (<http://www.sdcountyrecovery.com/>) .

For additional information regarding requirements for water quality protection during both emergency and non-emergency conditions, contact the Regional Stormwater Hotline at 1-888-846-0800.