Cleaning up ash after a fire

Summary

- Smoke from fires can leave behind potentially harmful ash – inside and outside your home.
- There are some general precautions to take when cleaning up ash to protect your health and safety.
- Prevent young children from playing near the ash until the area has been cleaned.
- In many cases, soap and water will be enough to clean areas lightly dusted with ash.
- Seek further advice from your local council on clean-up activities.

If your home has been affected by smoke from a fire, it is possible that ash particles may still be present, even after the smoke has gone.

Houses, sheds and gardens can be affected and the ash can leave potential health hazards. If your home has been affected by smoke, make sure you take steps to clean up any ash and protect your health and safety.

When cleaning up ash or soot, make sure you:

- Wear a dust mask, gloves, a long sleeved shirt and long pants and avoid skin contact.
- Wash any ash off your skin as soon as possible.
- Prevent children (in particular young children) playing near the ash until the area is cleaned up.
- Avoid getting ash in the air as much as possible. Do not use leaf blowers or take other actions that will put ash in the air.
- Gently sweep indoor and outdoor hard surfaces before wet mopping.
- Use a damp cloth or wet mop on lightly dusted areas.
- Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA-filter.
- Seek further advice from your local council on clean-up activities.

Frequently asked questions about cleaning up ash after a fire

What is ash?

Smoke consists of particles that weren’t fully consumed by the flames. Many of these particles stay small, even microscopic, but they occur in high amounts which makes them visible to the eye. When they fall to the ground, they are identified as soot or ash.

Soot is mostly composed of carbon. It is organic material that has not been completely burnt. Ash is incombustible material that is left after a fire (this means that it can be burnt no further). Depending on the type of fire and what has been burnt, other substances such as tar, plastics and even metals may also be deposited on the surfaces of your home after a fire.

Smoke can linger, even after a fire has been put out, which means that ash particles can continue to settle on your house, your garden and even inside your house for hours or even days after a fire.

Why is ash bad for your health?

Smoke is a mixture of particles, water vapour and gases. But fine particles called PM2.5 are the biggest health concern. These are the particles that can be present in ash and soot.

Ash and soot can be irritating to the lungs and the skin. Breathing these fine particles deeply into the lungs can cause breathing problems and worsen pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma and heart disease.

Signs of short term irritation such as itchy eyes, skin irritations, sore throat, runny nose and coughing usually clear up in healthy adults once you’re away from the smoke.

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How does ash get inside the house?

Even though you may have closed your doors and windows and turned off any cooling or heating systems, ash can still come into the home in other ways, such as through:

- holes in the ceiling
- cornices that are cracked or missing with visible gaps into the roof space
- fans and vent points that are not sealed
- gaps in ceiling roses
- gaps in connections between flues and the ceiling
- openings around doors and windows.

Do different roof types let in more ash and dust than others?

Yes:

- Open slat eaves are likely to allow more particles into the ceiling cavity than sealed eaves.
- Tiled roofs, especially where the tiles are cracked or in a state of disrepair, allow more particles into the roof space due to the multiple joins where each separate tile connects.
- Metal roofs consist of large sheets of metal with fewer joins than tiled roofs, allowing fewer particles into the roof space.
- Reflective foil insulated roofs provide an additional barrier that may reduce particle load into the roof space.

Should I be worried about ash that is accumulating on down-lights? Could it be a fire hazard?

According to Energy Safe Victoria, downlights pose a fire risk if they become covered by insulation or ceiling debris (including dust or ash residue).

For more information refer to Energy Safe Victoria

Is it safe to go into my roof cavity?

Residents are advised not to go into their roof cavities without expert advice or without following safety precautions. For more information about hazards in roof cavities read Hazards in roof cavities or phone the Victorian Government’s Environmental Health Unit on 1300 761 874 during business hours.

How do I clean ash from inside my home?

- Wash indoor surfaces with water. If a surface film is visible, wash with soap and water.
- Wash cooking utensils with detergent and hot water or run them through the dishwasher.
- Wash soft furnishings (upholstered furniture, curtains, carpets/rugs, cushions and bedding) or vacuum using a vacuum with a HEPA filter, so particles don’t blow back into your house.
- Wash clothes left exposed in the house (such as on the floor or on the clothes line).
- Wash children’s toys with soap and water.
- Have heating, ventilating and air-conditioning units and all ductwork professionally cleaned and replace filters, to remove soot, ash and smoke residue.

How do I clean ash on the outside of my home?

- Wash ash and debris into landscaped areas wherever practical.
- Pressure wash or hose down all exterior surfaces including the roof, walls, driveways and paths, decks, windows and flyscreens.
- Clean windows with soap and water or window cleaner.
- If you have a chimney, you may want to get a professional to clean it for you.
- Ash and soot on the ground and in your landscaping will continue to generate airborne particles when the wind blows, so water it down regularly.
Take your car to a car wash or wash it over a vegetated area such as your lawn.

Can I eat my garden vegetables, fruit or herbs?
Always use common sense when deciding whether or not food is safe to eat. Vegetables, fruit or herbs should be washed in water prior to eating. If you do not wish to eat the produce in your garden, affected vegetation can be washed and composted.

I use my rainwater tank as a drinking water supply. Will my tank water be contaminated?
General advice from the Department of Health and Human Services is that if your tank water supply tastes, looks or smells unusual do not use it for drinking, bathing or for pets. The town water supply is safe to use for drinking and all other domestic uses.

I am concerned about my pets. What should I do?
Wash pet bedding, bowls and toys and make sure you change any water. If you have any concerns about the health of your pets, take them to see a vet.

Where to get help
- Your local council – for advice on clean-up activities
- Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health and Human Services Tel. 1300 761 874
- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24
- Asthma Australia Tel. 1800 645 130
- VicEmergency Hotline Tel. 1800 226 226 – for the latest information on total fire bans, fire restrictions and major fires
- Environment Protection Authority Victoria Tel. 1300 372 842 – for news and updates on air quality after a fire

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