

# Safety starts with preparedness

## Ready for anything, anytime



## Stay safe, be proactive

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**LifeCare.**

# Coping With Wildfires

At some point, your home or community may be threatened by a wildfire. A wildfire is an unplanned, unwanted fire burning in a natural area. Wildfires can occur anywhere, and are typically most likely to ignite during hot, dry weather, and especially during droughts. Homes and businesses may be situated in or near areas susceptible to wildfires. Once a fire has started, lives may be at risk and damage to property, wildlife and natural resources can be devastating since wildfires are difficult to contain. The impact may cover large areas with extensive burning, embers traveling more than a mile away from the wildfire itself, and smoke causing health issues for people far away from the fire. This guide offers tips and strategies on how to prevent, prepare for and cope with a wildfire.

Note—The information in this guide is intended as a guideline only. Always follow any specific instructions provided by local authorities.

## Preventing Wildfires

Wildfires can start from natural causes, such as lightning, but most are caused by humans, either accidentally—from cigarettes, campfires, or outdoor burning—or intentionally. To protect yourself and your environment, contact your local fire department or forestry office for information on fire laws in your area—and strictly follow them. In addition, follow these wildfire safety practices:

- Use caution any time you use fire. If you must build a campfire, follow any posted or local rules or regulations. Also, keep the campfire small and build it away from overhanging branches, dry grass and leaves, and rotten stumps or logs. Scrape away litter or other burnable material within a 10-foot circle to keep the campfire from spreading. Keep plenty of water handy and make sure the fire is completely doused—stir it and douse it

again to be sure. Dispose of charcoal briquettes and fireplace ashes properly, never leave any outdoor fire unattended, and make sure that outdoor fires are fully extinguished and cold to the touch before leaving the area.

- Where smoking is permitted, smoke only in clearings where there is at least three feet around you on all sides and grind out the cigarette, cigar or tobacco in the dirt, never on a stump or log.
- Always have a fire extinguisher or hose nearby.
- Make sure your vehicle's spark arrester is working properly by checking with the dealer or a mechanic. Do not park vehicles in tall, dry grass if a fire weather watch or fire weather/red flag warning has been issued. Exhaust systems are very hot and can ignite dry grass.
- Keep the gas grill and propane tank at least 15 feet away from any structure. Clear a 15-foot area around the grill. Do not use the grill during potentially dangerous fire weather conditions. Store combustible or flammable materials in approved safety containers away from the house.
- Report hazardous conditions that could cause a wildfire. For instance, if you see smoldering campfires or smoking hazards that are not properly extinguished, notify your local fire department immediately.
- Follow all manufacturers' instructions when using lanterns, stoves or heaters outdoors. Always make sure they are completely cool before refueling and move the appliance to a new clearing before lighting it, especially if fuel spills when filling it. Never light lanterns, stoves or heaters inside a tent, trailer or camper and, if you move them inside, make sure there is adequate ventilation.
- If you must burn trash or debris, observe local regulations (it is not legal to do so in some communities; others have specific regulations)

and do so safely. Do not burn on the ground where ashes or sparks can be blown around, rather use a container placed in a cleared area away from branches and overhead wires.

- Do not use welders or any equipment that creates sparks outside on dry, windy days. If you use equipment such as chain saws, generators, trail bikes, etc. in wooded areas, they too must be equipped with working spark arresters.

### **Protecting Yourself, Your Loved Ones and Your Home From Fires**

Learn about your community's risk for wildfires by contacting your local emergency management office, planning and zoning department, or forestry office. They can usually provide valuable information on how to safeguard your home and how to react when a wildfire threatens.

The National Weather Service (NWS) issues notices when weather conditions such as strong wind, low relative humidity, and high temperatures make wildfires more likely. During these dangerous periods, NWS urges everyone to use extreme caution because a simple spark can cause a major wildfire.

- *Fire Weather Watch*: National Weather Service (NWS) issues a fire weather watch when potentially dangerous fire weather conditions are possible over the next 12 to 72 hours.
- *Fire Weather/Red Flag Warning*: NWS issues a fire weather warning or red flag when fire danger exists and weather patterns that support wildfires are either occurring or expected to occur within 24 hours. Authorities may issue a fire weather watch before a warning, but a warning may also be the initial notification.

Your community may also use the National Fire Danger Rating System to provide a daily estimate of the fire danger (i.e., low, moderate, high, very high, and extreme).

- *Evacuation Notice*: If the danger is imminent, local authorities may issue an evacuation notice to alert residents that a fire is nearby and it is important to leave the area. Evacuation orders vary by state and community and may range from voluntary to mandatory. When authorities issue a mandatory evacuation notice, leave the area immediately.

In addition, the following safety tips may help:

- Know how to stay informed. Receiving timely information about weather conditions or other emergency events can make all the difference in knowing when to take action to be safe.
  - Monitor the weather reports provided by your local news radio and TV stations.
  - Download the FEMA app from <https://www.fema.gov/mobile-app> to receive real-time alerts from the National Weather Service.
  - Sign up for community alerts in your area and be aware of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA)- which requires no-sign up. To find out what alerts are available in your area, do an Internet search with your town, city, or county name and the word "alerts."
  - Consider buying a NOAA Weather Radio (NWR) All Hazards receiver, which receives broadcast alerts directly from NWS. You can purchase these at many retail outlets, such as electronics and big box stores, or online. Some NWR receivers are designed to work with external notification devices with visual and vibrating alerts for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.
  - Think about how you will stay informed if there is a power outage. Have extra batteries for a battery-operated radio and your cell phone. Consider having a hand crank radio or cell phone charger.
- Install smoke detectors on each level of your home. Test them monthly and change batteries at least once a year.
- Designate a room that can be closed off from outside air. Close all doors and windows. Set up a portable air cleaner to keep indoor pollution levels low when smoky conditions exist.
- Make sure you and all loved ones know where the fire extinguisher is located and how to use it.
- Clean roofs and gutters regularly. Inspect chimneys at least twice a year and have them cleaned annually. Chimneys and stovepipes should also be equipped with spark arresters.

- Consider investing in protective shutters or fire-resistant drapes.
- Be cautious when carrying flammable or combustible household products that can cause fires or explosions if handled wrong, such as aerosols, cooking oils, rubbing alcohol, and hand sanitizer.
- Eliminate all combustible materials within 30 feet of your home. Examples include: combustible litter on roofs and gutters, fire-prone vegetation, firewood stacks, combustible patio furniture/accessories and combustible decking. Trim tree branches that overhang your roof and chimney. Store woodpiles at least 30 feet away and in a vegetation-free zone such as a graveled area.
- Work with neighbors to reduce fuels up to and farther than 100 feet around your homes by thinning and pruning vegetation to remove underbrush and ensure trees do not touch each other for continuous canopies.
- Plant fire-resistant, low-volume vegetation that retains moisture well and needs minimum maintenance such as pruning and removing dead and dying branches.
- Create “fuel breaks,” such as driveways, gravel walkways, and lawns.
- Store flammable materials such as gasoline, oil, kerosene, turpentine, etc. in approved safety containers and at the minimum distance required by code and place underground or on a noncombustible pad.
- Maintain a garden hose that can reach all areas of your home and identify another outside water source such as a hydrant, swimming pool, pond, etc. that can be utilized in case of fire.
- Make sure your insurance policies and personal documents like ID are up to date and your insurance policies contain adequate coverage.
- Keep insurance policies, photographs of your home and valuables (for insurance purposes, should they be damaged or destroyed), legal documents and other valuables in a safe deposit box or fireproof and waterproof container. Make copies and keep them in a secure password protected digital space.

## **Develop an Evacuation Plan and Review It with Your Loved Ones**

Assemble a disaster supplies kit that contains: a first-aid kit, an emergency fund of cash, non-perishable food and a non-electric can opener, at least one gallon of water per person per day, a change of clothing and footwear, bedding and/or sleeping bags, a battery-powered radio and flashlights (including extra batteries) and any essential items for children, the elderly and pets (e.g., food, diapers, warm clothing, collar, leash, etc.). Plan enough supplies for 3 days.

Remember that not everyone can afford to respond by stocking up on necessities. For those who can afford it, making essential purchases and slowly building up supplies in advance will allow for longer time periods between shopping trips. This helps to protect those who are unable to procure essentials in advance of the pandemic and must shop more frequently. In addition, consider avoiding WIC-labeled products so that those who rely on these products can access them.

If you already have one at home, set aside a respirator, like an N95 respirator, to keep smoke particles out of the air you breathe. Respirators are not meant to fit children. It may be difficult to find respirators. Cloth masks, surgical masks, and dust masks will not protect you from smoke inhalation. To ensure that healthcare workers have access to N95 respirators, it is best to limit your exposure to smoke rather than buy respirators.

Plan for pet safety. If you must evacuate, take your pets with you if possible. However, if you are going to a public shelter, it is important to understand that animals may not be allowed inside. Plan in advance for shelter alternatives that will work for both you and your pets.

Make a back-up emergency plan in case you can't care for your animals yourself. Develop a buddy system with neighbors, friends and relatives to make sure that someone is available to care for or evacuate your pets if you are unable to do so.

Know your evacuation routes; plan your transportation and a place to stay. Identify several escape routes for your location in case roads are blocked. If you will need to share transportation, make arrangements now. If you will need to use

public transportation, including paratransit, contact your local government emergency management agency to ask how an evacuation will work.

Plan how you will communicate with family members. In a dangerous situation, your first thoughts will be the safety of your family and friends. In case you are not together when authorities issue a fire weather watch or fire weather/red flag warning, practice how you will communicate with each other. Remember that sending texts is often faster than making a phone call. Keep important numbers written down in your wallet, not just on your phone. It is sometimes easier to reach people outside of your local area during an emergency, so choose an out-of-town contact for all family members to call or use social media. Decide where your household members will meet.

### **Additional Tips/Precautions for Seniors and People With Disabilities**

If you are elderly or disabled, you may need to take additional precautions. If you live alone, seek help from trusted neighbors, community members or professionals (police, health care workers, etc.) If you live in an assisted living facility or retirement community, listen to directions from directors of the facility and speak up about your needs. Plus, consider the following:

- If you are elderly or disabled, your kit should also contain the following supplies:
  - An extra supply of prescription medications, as well as a list of medications including dosage and any allergies
  - Extra eyeglasses and hearing-aid batteries (remember to replace hearing aid and other batteries annually)
  - Extra wheelchair batteries or other special equipment
  - A list of the style and serial numbers of medical devices such as pacemakers
  - Copies of medical insurance and Medicare cards
  - List of doctors and emergency contacts
- Plan emergency procedures with trusted friends, home health care agencies or workers. Make sure at least one of them has a key to your home.
- Find out about emergency shelters set up in the area; often shelters are set up exclusively for people with special needs.
- Contact your city or county government's emergency information management office. Many local offices keep lists of people with disabilities so they can be located quickly in a sudden emergency.
- Plan how you will evacuate or signal for help.
- Tell others where to find your emergency supplies.
- Label equipment like wheelchairs, canes or walkers. Plus, know the size and weight of your wheelchair, in addition to whether or not it is collapsible.
- Teach others how to operate necessary equipment.
- Wear medical alert tags or bracelets to help identify your disability.
- If you are dependent on dialysis or other life sustaining treatment, know the location and availability of more than one facility.

Note—If you are elderly, and live alone, have someone help you with these tasks.

### **When a Wildfire Threatens**

If wildfires are threatening your community, stay tuned to your phone alerts and/or frequently check online emergency/media outlets, TV, and/or radio, for weather updates, emergency instructions or evacuation orders. In addition, take the following steps:

- Create an emergency plan if you haven't already, review it with your loved ones and make sure you all understand it. Make or review plans for evacuation and care of pets as well. If you are elderly or disabled, contact your city or county government's emergency information management office for information on shelters for the elderly and those requiring special assistance.
- Keep your cell phone charged when wildfires could be in your area. Purchase backup charging devices to power electronics.
- Store valuables and personal papers in a password protected digital space and/or fireproof containers (or plan to take them with you).

- Connect garden hoses long enough to reach any area of the home and fill garbage cans, tubs or other large containers with water.
- Back your car into the garage or park it facing the route of escape. Close garage and car doors and windows against smoke, leave the keys in the ignition and disconnect automatic garage door openers (in case of power failure) so you can make a fast getaway.
- Smoke and ash from the fires can cause poor air quality. Stay inside and use an air conditioner, preferably with an air filter, if you have health problems, especially asthma, emphysema, other lung problems or heart conditions. People who are not at risk for health problems should still be cautious and avoid exercising if the air is hazy and/or causes coughing or irritation.
- If possible, arrange to stay with a friend or relative in a safe area if you are instructed to evacuate.

**If you are instructed to evacuate:**

- Do so immediately. Go to designated community shelter areas and, if possible, notify a relative or friend in another part of the country of your plans and your whereabouts. Listen to instructions carefully and allow yourself as much time as possible.
- If you are elderly or disabled, contact the local police or health care workers for assistance in getting to the shelter. If you live in an assisted living facility or retirement home, they should already have emergency plans documented. Be sure you know how to respond within your community.
- Wear protective clothing (i.e., sturdy shoes, cotton or wool pants and long-sleeved shirt, gloves and a handkerchief to cover your face) to prevent burns.
- Take your disaster supplies kit.
- Keep mobile telephones and/or two-way radios handy to communicate in case of emergency.
- Choose an escape route as far as possible from the fire.

**If you're sure you have time before you evacuate:**

- Close windows, doors, vents, venetian blinds or non-combustible window coverings and heavy drapes. Remove flammable or lightweight curtains.

- Turn off gas at the meter and pilot lights. (Note—You will need to have a professional turn the gas back on.)
- Open the fireplace damper and close fireplace screens.
- Turn on lights in each room to make your house more visible through heavy smoke.
- Seal attic and ground vents with plywood or commercially available seals.
- Connect the garden hose to outside taps. Wet the roof and/or place lawn sprinklers on the roof and near above-ground fuel tanks. Wet or remove shrubs within 15 feet of your home.
- Move flammable patio furniture indoors.

Note—If you are elderly and live alone, plan to have someone help you with these tasks.

**If You Are Trapped in Your Home**

If you do not leave before the fire reaches your immediate area and you are trapped in your home, take the following actions:

- Call 911, provide your location, and explain your situation.
- Turn on the lights to increase the visibility of your home in heavy smoke.
- Keep doors, windows, vents, and fire screens closed. Keep your doors unlocked.
- If you already have one at home, use a respirator, like an N95 respirator, to keep smoke particles out of the air you breathe. Respirators are not meant to fit children. It may be difficult to find respirators. Cloth masks, surgical masks, and dust masks will not protect you from smoke inhalation. If you do not already have N95 respirators, you can reduce your exposure to smoke by doing the following:
  - Choose a room to close off from outside air and set up a portable air cleaner or filter to keep the air in this room clean even when it's smoky in the rest of the building and outdoors.
  - Use high efficiency filters in your central air conditioning system to capture fine particles from smoke. If your system has fresh air intake, set the system to "recirculate" mode and close the outdoor intake damper.

- Avoid using anything that burns, such as candles and fireplaces. Do not vacuum, as vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home. Do not smoke tobacco or other products. Smoking puts even more pollution into the air.
- Move flammable materials (e.g., curtains, furniture) away from windows and sliding glass doors.
- Fill sinks and tubs with water.
- Stay inside, away from outside walls and windows.

### **If You Are Trapped in a Vehicle or Outdoors**

Researchers are examining guidance to provide the best advice for last resort actions if you are trapped in a vehicle or outdoors.

- If you are trapped by the fire, immediately call 911, if possible, to provide your location and explain your situation.
- If you are in a vehicle, base your decision to stay in the vehicle or to take cover outside on your specific circumstances, including your:
  - Distance from the fire
  - The direction of the fire
  - Whether there is fuel (e.g., brush and trees) near your vehicle
  - The potential for rescue.
- Try to stay away from fuel sources; stay in a rocky area or roadway, or near a water source.
- Stay low to reduce the effects of heat and smoke, breathe through cloth to avoid inhaling smoke, and cover yourself with a wool blanket or coat, or even dirt.

### **Returning Home After a Wildfire**

- Do not return home until authorities say it is safe to do so.
- Avoid hot ash, charred trees, smoldering debris, and live embers. The ground may contain heat pockets that can burn you or spark another fire. When cleaning up ash, use a respirator to limit your exposure.

- When cleaning, wear protective clothing, including a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, work gloves, appropriate cloth face coverings or masks, and sturdy thick-soled shoes during clean-up efforts.
- Use appropriate masks or respirators.
- When cleaning up ash, use a respirator to limit your exposure and wet debris to minimize breathing dust particles
- People with asthma and/or other lung conditions should take precautions in areas with poor air quality, as it can worsen symptoms. Children should not help with clean-up efforts.
- Pay attention to any health symptoms if you or your children have asthma, COPD, heart disease, or are pregnant. Get to medical help if you need it.
- Document property damage with photographs. Conduct an inventory and contact your insurance company for assistance.
- Send text messages or use social media to reach out to family and friends. Phone systems are often busy following a disaster. Make calls only in emergencies.

### **Disaster Relief**

In the aftermath of a fire, there will probably be many pressing issues to take care of, but it is essential that your first priority be your own safety—and that of your loved ones. If you are in need of emergency services (shelter, clothing, food, money, etc.), check online emergency/media outlets, TV, and/or radio, for resources. In addition, safeguard yourself and your loved ones by taking the following tips into consideration:

- Use your phone, computer, television or radio to obtain information on shelters, helpful resources and safety advisories.
- Stay out of and away from damaged buildings. If you had to evacuate, return home only when authorities say it is safe.



- If you have children or grandchildren with you, make sure they are constantly supervised.
- Be alert for potential hazards. Take extreme care when moving in an area damaged by fire as hazards may still exist, including hot spots, which can flare up without warning. Evacuate immediately if you smell smoke.
- For several hours after the fire, maintain a “fire watch.” Check and re-check for smoke, sparks or hidden embers throughout the house, including the roof and the attic.
- Cooperate with authorities. Whether you’re asked to relinquish telephone lines, keep off emergency roads or given other directions, do your best to comply.
- If you are elderly or disabled and need assistance with transportation, contact your city or county government’s emergency information management office.
- Engage with your community. Know that it’s normal to feel anxious or stressed. Take care of your body and talk to someone if you are feeling upset.

### **What to Do if Your Home Is Damaged or Destroyed**

If there is a federal disaster declaration, a “hotline” is usually made available to provide information about public, private and voluntary agency programs to help you recover from the fire.

When assessing the damage to your home, use extreme caution. Watch for hidden dangers: areas that are still hot, falling structures, sharp metal and other potential hazards. If you have insurance, make a detailed list of the damages and contact your insurance representative as soon as possible. If you aren’t able to call from your home, tell your agent where you can be reached—and try to be patient. Where there is extensive and widespread damage, insurance representatives usually handle claims on an as-needed basis, beginning with the most serious situations. Property

insurance typically protects against the financial loss due to damages incurred to real and/or personal property, but policies vary, and many have exclusions. Read your policy carefully and contact your agent with specific questions about coverage or the claims process. In addition, the following tips may help:

- Consider hiring a reliable contractor to make repairs—but beware of frauds who prey on disaster victims. Your best bet is to get a reference from friends, neighbors or co-workers who have had improvement work done. Get written estimates from several firms. Ask for explanations for price variations. Don’t automatically choose the lowest bidder. Be sure to get a signed contract from any contractor you agree to work with.
- Take pictures of the damage—both to the house and your possessions—for insurance purposes.
- Make temporary repairs to prevent further damage from rain, wind or looting.
- Keep all repair receipts for your insurance agent.
- If you have to rebuild your home, check local building codes and ordinances to find out about fire-resistant designs and noncombustible materials that may help reduce the damaging effects of wildfires in the future. For example, using fire-resistant shingles, or replacing vinyl siding with other materials, like stucco, that are less likely to melt.
- If you live in an assisted living or retirement facility, the director should advise you of any damage and what steps, if any, you will need to take.

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