

How to Clean Up Smoke and Soot from a Fire

Information for Los Angeles County Residents



Smoke and soot can travel and enter rooms affecting paint, carpet, upholstery, drapes, clothing and any other belongings. The first step that should be taken when cleaning up after a fire is ventilating the fire scene and removing debris. Thorough cleaning and neutralizing of both the deposits and odors are required, including cleaning outdoor surfaces like playground equipment, prior to any restoration or reuse.

Clean-up Recommendations and Guidelines:

- Wear gloves such as household dish washing gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and pants to avoid skin contact. If you get any ash on your skin, wash it off as soon as possible.
- Wear personal protective gear, including a well-fitting N95 mask, to avoid breathing in ash and other airborne particles.
- Ventilate the area (open windows, etc.) to remove soot and odor.
- To remove soot and smoke from walls, furniture and floors, use a mild soap or detergent or mix 4 to 6 tbsp. of tri-sodium phosphate with 1 cup household cleaner or chlorine bleach to every gallon of warm water. Wear rubber gloves. Be sure to rinse surfaces with clear warm water and dry thoroughly.
- Wash walls one small area at a time, starting from the floor up. Immediately rinse with clear water.
- Wash ceilings last.
- Do not repaint walls and ceilings until both are completely dry.

Cleaning Techniques for Specific Materials

Curtains and Upholstery: Soot is oily and can smear easily. Remove as much loose soot as possible using a vacuum with a HEPA filter, if available. On sooty fabrics, do not use an upright vacuum or any machine or attachment with brushes or beater bars, as it will force soot into your other possessions and make them much more difficult to clean. Hold the vacuum nozzle slightly above the surface and let the vacuum do the work in lifting soot from the surface. **Immediately** after cleaning cover possessions with clean sheets to prevent re-soiling during your other clean-up efforts. Do not machine wash drapes or other materials that require dry cleaning.

Carpet: Use a rotary scrubber or an extraction machine from a rental outlet or supermarket or hire a professional carpet cleaner.

Clothes and Bedding: Smoke odors can remain in fabrics for a very long time until all the unburned chemicals have been removed. Many of them are invisible to the eye. Soak overnight with detergent and wash normally. For items that can be bleached, add laundry bleach as normal during the wash cycle.

Hard Materials – Less Porous (tile, countertops, sealed wood, glass, metal, appliances, and vinyl wallpaper):
Use a sponge, towel, or mop with household cleaning detergent.

Cleaning Tips for Playground Equipment

Playground equipment can be cleaned by following the cleaning techniques mentioned above. However, for sandboxes, thorough cleaning is not effective to remove ash and soot. Replace sand with new sand to ensure safety and cleanliness.

Safety Tips During Restoration

- Do not use electrical appliances that have been near a fire.
- Do not use ceiling fixtures if the ceiling is wet.
- Do not touch anything during your first inspection to prevent transferring soot from item to item.
- If needed, seek professional help in restoration effort.

For more information, contact the Environmental Health Division at (888) 700-9995 or email ehmail@ph.lacounty.gov.