



In the Age of Climate Change,

## **Fires & Post-Fire Cleaning Tips for Housecleaner Employers & All of Us**

**Purpose:** This is a set of guidelines for all of us, but especially employers of housecleaners, on how best to support their employees during and after fires and other climate related natural disasters.

### **General Guidelines:**

- Always put health first!
- Plan ahead! Create a plan with your family and employee(s) before a fire occurs.
- It is never too late to take steps to protect safety and health.

### **What to do during a disaster in an area impacted by fire or smoke:**

#### **Put Health First.**

- If you are in a fire zone, listen to the local emergency instructions on whether and when to evacuate. Do not require your employee to come to work if your home is threatened and be sure they know not to come to work. If you are in a smoke zone, don't require your employee to work outside or indoors if it exposes them to hazardous smoke. What is hazardous varies based upon the person and their age and health conditions. (Refer to the local Air Quality Index such as [AirNow](#) for information on levels of particulates in the air and health risks by zipcode.) That said, we recommend:<sup>1</sup>
  - Above 100 AQI, employees with sensitivities to particulate matter or other air pollution (such as asthma) should not work outdoors (and working indoors is okay only if the air is not contaminated).
  - Above 150 AQI, no one should work outdoors (and working indoors is okay only if the air is not contaminated).<sup>2</sup>
- If a worker is working during smokey conditions please see our Tips for Clean-up Work Safety below.

#### **Support Your Employee:**

- If your employee lives in a fire zone, they may also need to evacuate or shelter in place and will be unavailable to work.
- Compensate your employee for any day of missed work caused by fire or smoke.
- Consider offering your employee a paid day off (or more) to take care of personal preparedness needs or attend to their own home/family's health.

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<sup>1</sup> Our recommendations are based, in part, on the [Airnow.gov's Air Quality Guide for Particle Pollution](https://www.airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=pubs.aqguidepart):  
<https://www.airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=pubs.aqguidepart>

<sup>2</sup> There is a new regulation that requires protective measures if AQI is 151 or above and workers are exposed to that for one hour or more.



- If your employee depends on transit to get to your home, learn how the fire/disaster has impacted their ability to show up on time and be ready to adjust their schedule (eg. having later start time to the job or offering a ride if needed).
- Help your employee connect to financial support if they have been impacted by a fire. Many undocumented workers are not eligible for FEMA and government aid but can access private relief funds through not-for-profit organizations, such as Sonoma County's Undocufund. (More resources below.)

### **What to do after the fire during the clean-up and reconstruction:**

- Often there is a lot of clean up and rebuilding needed after a fire. See the extended safety recommendations below that will be important for you, your family and your employees to stay safe.
- If the disaster has made it difficult or impossible for you to continue to employ a worker in your home, then consider helping your employee find a new job. And we recommend that you provide severance pay at 1 week's pay for every year worked for you.

### **How to prepare for a future fire or disaster:**

- Create a work agreement that includes a plan in case there is a fire in your region.<sup>3</sup>
- Sign up for [ALIA](#) with your housecleaner to provide them with paid sick time off. (Alia is portable benefits program designed for housecleaners where their employers pay a little at a time (\$5/cleaning session) to build up a fund to draw upon.)
- Have an emergency and evacuation plan for your family and for your employees as well as supplies such as clean water and a grab-and-go backpack. (Emergency preparedness resources linked below.)

### **Safe Cleanup after a Fire:**

Provided by the Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley.

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Ash, soot, and other material can be toxic – given the mix of materials that has burned. This is why agencies with trained staff are doing the initial clean up to get rid of hazardous materials, etc.

- If you have a lot of ash and soot, you should hire a professional company because of the risks involved. This cost is usually covered by home insurance.
- If you have only a little ash in your home, then follow the tips below.

### **Tips for Clean-up Work Safety:**

If you have only a little ash in your home and are going to handle the cleaning on your own or with a housecleaner, make sure you follow these precautions:

- Before doing any cleaning, survey the area to look for dangers (see list of hazards below).

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<sup>3</sup> Look to [www.domesticemployers.org](http://www.domesticemployers.org) for sample work agreements and other best practices for housecleaner employment.



- Provide N95 masks for workers who are cleaning up ash or soot. Note that it can be more challenging for workers to breathe while wearing these masks. We urge caution for workers who have heart or lung conditions. Extend the time allocated for your employees to perform their work or reduce the scope of duties. Encourage workers to take time to rest and reduce the intensity of their work.
- Provide gloves and make sure workers are wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants, as they also should avoid skin contact with ash or soot. Wash up as soon as possible if any ash comes into contact with skin. (See full list of protective gear below.)
- Provide an air cleaner (“air purifier”) that is the right size for your room or house. If it is the type that has a filter, chose one that has HEPA filters. For a full list of certified air cleaners:  
<https://www.arb.ca.gov/research/indoor/aircleaners/certified.htm>.
- Provide a HEPA vacuum for vacuuming ash or soot, as they have “high-efficiency particulate air” filters filter out the small particles.
- Encourage your employee to avoid generating dust or lifting ashes. They should not sweep or use leaf blower or other actions that lift the ash.
- Provide water spray bottles and rags or mops to clean up ash. When ash is sprayed with a little water and then wiped up, it won’t blow up into the air.
- Encourage your employee to change work clothes to avoid bringing ash and dust home.
- Do not ask a worker to lift heavy loads. If possible, get help from a second or third person or divide the weight to load several lighter packages.
- Do not ask a worker to move any tank or pipes that have come out of place, or containers of paint or chemicals. Only qualified people can remove them.
- Make sure that stairs, ceilings and other structures have been inspected and are safe before working on or under them.
- Do not ask a worker to operate equipment that runs on gasoline or diesel inside a building.
- Cleaning soot can cause streaking so it is good to test a small area first. To avoid more toxic products, try first with a dry sponge to remove some of the soot. Then use a mild dish detergent with a microfiber cloth or sponge to see if that does the job. (You still need to provide N95 respirators and gloves for this.) If you need to use chemical products, read the label and follow precautions and provide recommended protective gear.
- More on cleaning up soot: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/docs/emergunit/cleanFireDamage.pdf>

### **Common Hazards in Post-Fire Clean Up:**

There are many hazards that fires can create. Before your employees do any cleaning, survey the area to look for dangers and adopt our recommendations for “Tips for Clean-up Work Safety.”

- Ash, soot and dust are dangerous because they come from burned materials that could include plastics, lead, asbestos, computers, chemicals, etc.
- Heavy items that can strain muscles if improperly lifted and unstable structures (such as damaged trees or building) or surfaces that can fall.
- Tanks, pipes and other equipment containing hazardous materials such as propane or sewage.
- Containers containing paint, cleaning products or pesticides, or discolored soil and water.



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- Machinery such as pumps, generators and pressure washing machines which can emit deadly carbon monoxide gas.
- Damaged electrical cables or burned wires near water.
- Closed or confined spaces that are not well ventilated.
- Dust by demolition of concrete or brick
- Cleaning products: Most conventional cleaning products contain dangerous ingredients. Learn more at [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org).

### **Equipment and Tools to Provide Workers:**

- N95 Mask or respirator with filters
- Helmet
- Gloves of Nitrile for cleaning ash or soot and of leather to move and lift items
- Boots
- Work clothes with long sleeves and long pants
- Protective goggles
- Earplugs for loud noise

### **For More Information:**

- Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley ([www.lohp.org](http://www.lohp.org)): For more information health and safe clean-up.
- The California Domestic Workers Coalition ([www.cadomesticworkers.org](http://www.cadomesticworkers.org)): For more information for cleaners and other domestic workers who want to learn about their rights on the job: [www.cadomesticworkers.org](http://www.cadomesticworkers.org)
- Hand in Hand: The Domestic Employers Network ([www.domesticemployers.org](http://www.domesticemployers.org)): For more information for employers of cleaners, nannies and homecare attendants about fair employment practices.

### **More Resources on Safe, Fair, and Non-toxic Cleaning:**

[www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org)

<https://sfenvironment.org/tips-for-healthy-homes>

[Return Home Ash Cleaning Guide in Spanish](#)

[Sample Work Agreement for Housecleaning](#)

### **Resources For Immigrants impacted by Fire:**

<http://www.lacooperativa.org/california-wildfire-resources-for-immigrants/>

<https://undocufund.org>

### **General Fire and Recovery Resources:**

<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/wildfire.html>

<https://wildfirerecovery.caloes.ca.gov/>



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<https://calepa.ca.gov/disaster/fire/https://www.osha.gov/dts/wildfires/response.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/wildfires/afterfire.html>