



Checking Your Home after a Fire

Taking the appropriate steps to stay safe



Need Help Now?

If you need help after a home fire, please contact your local Red Cross »

Do not cut or walk past colored tape that was placed over doors or windows to mark damaged areas unless local authorities advise that it is safe to do so. If a building inspector has placed a color-coded sign on the home, do not enter it until you get more information, advice and instructions about what the sign means and whether it is safe to enter your home.

If you have children, leave them with a relative or friend while you conduct your first inspection of your home after the fire. The site may be unsafe for children, and seeing the damage firsthand may upset them and cause long-term effects, including nightmares.

Check for Structural Damage

- Check the outside of your home before you enter. Look for loose power lines, broken or damaged gas lines, foundation cracks, missing support beams or other damage. Damage on the outside can indicate a serious problem inside. Ask a building inspector or contractor to check the structure before you enter.
- If the door is jammed, don't force it open – it may be providing support to the rest of your home. Find another way to get inside.
- Damaged locks should be taken apart and wiped with oil. If locks can't be removed, squirt machine oil through a bolt opening or keyhole, and work the knob to distribute the oil. Hinges should also be thoroughly cleaned and oiled.
- Sniff for gas. If you detect natural or propane gas, or hear a hissing noise, leave the property immediately and get well away from it. Call the fire department after you reach safety.
- If you have a propane tank system, turn off all valves and contact a propane supplier to check the system out before you use it again.
- Check for smoke and embers throughout the home, including the attic.
- Beware of animals, such as rodents, snakes, spiders and insects, that may have entered your home. As you inspect your home, tap loudly and often on the floor with a stick to give notice that you are there.
- Damaged objects, such as furniture or stairs, may be unstable. Be very cautious when moving near them. Avoid holding, pushing or leaning against damaged building parts.
- Is your ceiling sagging? That means it got wet – which makes it heavy and dangerous. It will have to be replaced, so you can try to knock it down. Be careful: wear eye protection and a hard hat, use a long stick, and stand well away from the damaged area. Poke holes in the ceiling starting from the outside of the bulge to let any water drain out slowly. Striking the center of the damaged area may cause the whole ceiling to collapse.
- Is the floor sagging? It could collapse under your weight, so don't walk there! Small sections that are sagging can be bridged by thick plywood panels or thick, strong boards that extend at least 8–12 inches on each side of the sagging area.
- If the weather is dry, open windows and doors to ventilate and dry your home.
- If power is out, use a flashlight. Do not use any open flame, including candles, to inspect for damage or serve as alternate lighting.
- Disconnect and check all appliances for water damage before using them.
- Make temporary repairs such as covering holes, bracing walls, and removing debris. Save all receipts.
- Take photographs of the damage. You may need these to substantiate insurance claims later.

Checking Utilities and Major Systems

Telephones

- Check each telephone to see if it is still on the hook. Hang up any phones that aren't. Wait a few minutes, and then pick up one phone to listen for a dial tone to know whether you have working telephone service.
- If you don't have a dial tone, try unplugging all the phones. Plug in one at a time and listen for dial tone. This will help you determine if the phone itself is broken or the service is completely out. If it is, contact the telephone company to report the problem and request repair.

Electrical, Plumbing and Heating Systems

- If you see sparks, broken or frayed wires, or if you smell hot insulation, turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker.
- If there is a pool of water on the floor between you and the fuse box or circuit breaker panel, use a dry wooden stick to try to reach to turn off the main fuse or breaker, but do not step or stand in water to do that. If you cannot reach the fuse box or breaker panel, call a qualified electrician for assistance.
- Inspect the panel box for any breakers that may have tripped. A tripped breaker may indicate damaged wiring inside your home. Do not turn them on. Call an electrician.
- Use a flashlight to inspect fuses. Replace broken fuses with exactly the same amperage rating and never use an object such as a coin or strip of metal to bypass the protection that fuses provide.
- If you suspect sewage lines are damaged, avoid using sinks, showers or toilets and call a plumber.
- If water pipes are damaged, turn off the water at the main valve. Call a plumber for assistance.
- If you have a heating oil tank system, turn off all valves and contact a professional specializing in maintenance of such equipment before using it again.

Checking Household Items

- Normal household items, such as cleaning products, can cause toxic fumes and other hazards if they mix. See our household chemical safety tips.
- Spilled chemicals that don't pose a health risk must still be carefully cleaned up. Wear rubber gloves and discard spilled chemicals and rags used for cleaning according to the advice of local authorities.
- Throw away food, beverages and medicine exposed to heat, smoke or soot. Food that was in the freezer can be used if it still has ice crystals on it. If not, discard it.

Make Sure to:

- Stay out of any building that has water around it.
- Keep away from loose or dangling power lines. Report them immediately to the power company.
- Contact your insurance agent. Do not discard damaged goods until an inventory has been taken. Save receipts for money spent relating to fire loss. Your insurance agent may provide immediate help with living expenses until you are able to return home and may offer assistance for repairs.