



## COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO HEALTH AGENCY ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES DIVISION

2156 Sierra Way STE. B, San Luis Obispo, CA 93401

PO Box 1489, San Luis Obispo, CA 93406

Phone: (805) 781-5544 Fax: (805) 781-4211

Email: [ehs@co.slo.ca.us](mailto:ehs@co.slo.ca.us)

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### IMPORTANT HEALTH GUIDANCE: SAFE CLEANUP OF A BURNED STRUCTURE ASH

***All persons accessing burned structures should be aware of the hazards associated with those sites. Cleanup efforts may expose you to ash, soot, and fire decomposition products that may cause irritation and other health effects.***

Ash from burned structures is generally more hazardous than forest ash. Fire ash contains tiny particles (dust, dirt, soot) that can be deposited on indoor and outdoor surfaces and can be inhaled if the ash becomes airborne. Although the ash is not classified as a hazardous waste, it may contain traces of hazardous chemicals such as metals like lead, cadmium, nickel and arsenic; asbestos from older homes or other buildings; perfluorochemicals (from degradation of non-stick cookware, for example); flame retardants; and caustic materials. For these reasons, it is advisable to **be cautious and avoid exposure to the ash.**

#### HEALTH EFFECTS OF ASH

Fire ash may be irritating to the skin, nose, and throat, and may cause coughing. Fine particles can be inhaled deeply into lungs and may aggravate asthma and make it difficult to breathe. If the ash contains asbestos, nickel, arsenic or cadmium, then exposure is a particular concern because these substances can cause cancer. Because the substances in the ash vary, it is best to be cautious.

#### SENSITIVE PEOPLE

People with asthma or other lung diseases, pregnant women, and the elderly should exercise special caution because they may be more susceptible to health effects from the ash.

#### CHILDREN

Do not allow children to play in ash. Wash and clean all children's toys before using. Children should not be in the vicinity while cleanup is in progress. Even if you are careful, it is easy to stir up ash that may contain hazardous substances. In addition, the exploratory behavior of children may result in direct contact with contaminated materials.

#### PETS

Clean ash off house pets and other domesticated animals. Do not allow pets on contaminated sites.

**AVOID direct contact with ash. If you get ash on your skin, in your eyes, or in your mouth, wash it off as soon as you can.**

#### CLOTHING

Wear gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants to avoid skin contact. Goggles are also recommended. Contact with wet ash may cause chemical burns or irritation on skin. Change your shoes and clothing prior to leaving the site to avoid tracking ash offsite, into your car, or other places.

#### MASKS

When exposure to dust or ash cannot be avoided, use a well-fitted NIOSH-certified air-purifying respirator mask, such as you can obtain at a hardware store. A mask rated N-95 is much more effective than simpler dust or surgical masks in blocking particles from ash. Although smaller sized masks may appear to fit a

child's face, none of the manufacturers recommend their use in children. If your child is in an area that warrants wearing a mask, you should remove them to an environment with cleaner air. Persons with heart or lung disease should consult their physician before using a mask during post-fire cleanup.

## **CLEANUP**

Avoid disturbing or sifting through the ash as much as possible. Do not engage in activities that kick up ash particles and associated chemicals into the air. Gently sweep indoor and outdoor hard surfaces followed by wet mopping. A damp cloth or wet mop may be used on lightly dusted areas. When wetting down ash, use as little water as possible.

## **VACUUM**

Use a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA)-type vacuum to clean dust-contaminated surfaces. Avoid using a typical household vacuum which will re-suspend the collected dust into the air. Shop vacuums and other common vacuum cleaners do not filter out small particles, but rather blow such particles out the exhaust into the air where they can be breathed. Do not use leaf blowers or take other actions that will put ash into the air.

## **FOOD AND WATER**

Wash any home-grown fruits or vegetables from trees or gardens before eating. Avoid bringing other food to the site or eating at the affected site, or keep the food in a sealed container to prevent contamination and wash your hands well before eating. Consult with your drinking water provider to ensure the water is safe to drink.

## **DISPOSAL**

Ash from burned structures may be more hazardous than that of burned vegetation, due to the presence of synthetic or toxic materials stored in or used in the building of the structure. Lead, lead paint, and/or asbestos may have been used in the construction of older buildings. To ensure safety of people and to protect the environment care must be taken to control dust and containment of debris during clean up, storage, and transportation to a landfill.

Avoid washing ash into storm drains. Ash may be stored in plastic bags or other containers that will prevent it from being disturbed. If you suspect hazardous waste including asbestos is present, contact the San Luis Obispo County Integrated Waste Management Authority at (805) 782-8530 or visit [www.iwma.com](http://www.iwma.com). regarding appropriate disposal.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

For information and guidance about disposal of hazardous waste, please contact the San Luis Obispo County Integrated Waste Management Authority at (805) 782-8530 or visit [www.iwma.com](http://www.iwma.com).

For additional information and guidance for the safe handling and removal of ash from burned structures, visit the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) at [www.calepa.ca.gov/disaster/fire/](http://www.calepa.ca.gov/disaster/fire/).

For general information about the Chimney Fire response and recovery operations, please call the County Office of Emergency Services (SLO OES) incident information line at (805) 543-2444 or visit SLO OES online at [www.slocounty.ca.gov/OES](http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/OES).

