

## Wildfires

Wildfires are common in Texas, especially after long periods of drought. They can spread quickly and produce dangerous smoke, threatening property, lives and health. Help reduce your risks by learning how to respond.

### **What do I need to know about a wildfire in my area?**

Be prepared to evacuate. When the threat of wildfires is high, stay tuned to local radio, television or get information from the National Weather Service about NOAA Weather Radio. Be prepared to evacuate immediately. **Taking the following precautions can help you evacuate safely and quickly:**

- Park your car in the direction of escape, keep the windows rolled up to prevent smoke from entering.
- Load your family disaster supply kit in the car and keep family photos or other things you plan to take with you nearby. See the Family Preparedness Fact Sheet for details.
- Don't let children or other family members stray far from home.
- Wear protective clothing (long sleeves and long pants) and keep a handkerchief in your pocket to protect your face.
- Confine all pets to one room or area of the yard so you can gather them quickly.
- Leave the lights in your home on so that fire fighters can see it through dense smoke.
- Before you leave, call an out-of-town contact and tell them where you plan to go.

### **What are the health threats of wildfire smoke?**

Smoke can pose a serious health threat, especially if you have chronic heart or lung disease. Children and older adults are also at greater risk. Even healthy people can be affected by smoky conditions.

Smoke from wildfires is a mixture of gases and fine particles from burning trees and plants. It can hurt your eyes, irritate your respiratory system and worsen symptoms from pre-existing conditions. Common symptoms of smoke exposure include:

- Coughing
- Scratchy throat
- Irritated sinuses
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- Stinging eyes
- Runny nose

**If you experience any of these symptoms, take the following measures:**

- Limit outdoor activities as much as possible. When you must go outside, wear a protective mask with an N-95 rating and avoid physical exertion.
- Keep the windows and doors of your home shut.
- Run the air conditioner with the fresh-air intake closed and use high- efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters.
- Avoid cooking as much as possible.
- Do not burn candles or use fireplaces.
- Do not use vacuum cleaners which can stir up dust already inside your home.
- Keep your airways moist by drinking plenty of water. To help relieve dryness, breathe through a warm, wet cloth.

## **Wildfire Recovery**

### **Personal Safety**

Wildfires in Texas can spread quickly, damaging lives and property. But even after fires are put out, people should take care to avoid injuries as they return home to begin the recovery process. DSHS urges people to be aware of the following hazards:

- **Ash:** Adults should use a protective respirator mask (N-95 or P-100) while cleaning up areas in which ash particles cannot be controlled. Ash and dust from burned buildings may contain toxic and cancer causing chemicals including asbestos, arsenic and lead. Children should not be in the area while cleanup is in progress.
- **Electricity:** Avoid downed or damaged electrical lines. Electrical repairs should be done by a qualified technician.
- **Carbon Monoxide:** Place generators, power washers and other fuel burning devices at least 50 feet away from the house and away from open doors and windows to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.
- **Natural Gas:** Do not enter an area or building where you smell gas. Do not turn on the lights or light a match. Leave the area immediately, then call 9-1-1.
- **Propane:** If a home propane tank is damaged and leaking, call 9-1-1 and the propane service provider. Do not transport leaking propane tanks in a car or dispose of them in the trash.



# What you need to know about...



- **Food:** Discard food that may have spoiled, thawed or come into contact with hazardous materials like fire retardant or ash. Loss of power to refrigeration and freezer units can cause food to spoil. If you're not certain food is safe, throw it out.
- **Water:** Check with the water provider to be sure that water is safe to drink because water pressure may have been lost during the fire. Water from a damaged water system or well may require disinfection by boiling for one minute or stirring in 1/8 teaspoon of unscented bleach per gallon and letting sit for 30 minutes.
- **Debris:** Get a tetanus shot if you have not had a booster in 10 years or can't remember when your last shot was, and be careful. Broken glass, exposed wires, nails, wood, metal, plastic and other debris can cause puncture wounds, cuts and burns. Falling trees and tree limbs while using chain saws can cause severe injuries.

## Mental Health

Mental health is also a concern as people deal with the traumatic events that surround a fire. Common feelings after a wildfire include fear, sadness and guilt. People can have trouble sleeping or feel jumpy, irritable, or numb. These symptoms are normal, and there are things people can do to cope with traumatic events:

- Take breaks from cleanup efforts and don't overdo it. Get rest, drink plenty of water, and accept help from others.
- Return to as many personal and family routines as possible, and find ways to relax and do something that you and your family have enjoyed in the past.
- Exercise, but do so indoors if the air quality isn't acceptable.
- Talk about your experiences and feelings with family, friends or clergy, and keep a journal.
- Upsetting times can cause some people to use alcohol or drugs to cope with stress. In the long run, that will not help and may lead to other problems.

**For mental health assistance or additional information, dial 2-1-1.**

**For online information, go to [www.dshs.state.tx.us](http://www.dshs.state.tx.us) or [www.TexasPrepares.org](http://www.TexasPrepares.org).**