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FOR HOMES IN THE CORRIDOR

Wildfire Smoke and Wood Stove Soot Cleanup

Smoke and wood heat leave a film on walls, windows and the surfaces closest to the stove. It builds slowly, so most people stop seeing it. This guide covers safe cleanup after smoke events, soot from wood heat, and a few habits that keep it in check.

Protect yourself first

Fine ash and soot are an irritant. When you clean ash after a smoke event, wear a snug-fitting N95 or P100 respirator with two straps. Surgical masks and one-strap dust masks do not protect your lungs.[1] EPA says people with heart or lung disease, older adults and pregnant women should not do ash cleanup, and children should stay away until the area is clean. Keep pets out of the room too.

Cleaning up ash and smoke film

1. Close windows and doors while ash is falling. If you have central heating and cooling, EPA says a MERV 13 or higher filter can help.[2]
2. Mist ash lightly with water, then wipe it up with a damp cloth. Do not dry sweep or dust, and never use a leaf blower.[1]
3. Vacuum with a HEPA filter, and empty the vacuum outdoors.
4. Wash hard surfaces and windows with mild detergent and water. Rinse the cloth often.
5. Wash soft items that held smoke smell, such as curtains and throw blankets, according to their labels.
6. Replace the HVAC filter after a smoke event, then check it again in a week.

Wood stove and fireplace soot

1. Let ash cool completely before you move it.
2. Put ash in a covered metal container, soak it with water, and keep it outdoors at least 10 feet from the home or anything that can burn.[3] Never empty ash straight into a trash can.[4]
3. Dust the area around the stove with a dry cloth first, then wash with a mild degreasing cleaner.
4. Test any cleaner on a hidden spot. Soot can smear on painted walls if you scrub too hard.
5. Have the chimney professionally inspected and cleaned at least once a year.[3]

Habits that keep soot down

- Burn seasoned, dry firewood. EPA says wood burns best below 20 percent moisture and should season at least six months.[5]
- Keep the stove door closed except when loading.
- Run a HEPA air cleaner in the room where you spend the most time during smoke events.
- Replace the HVAC filter on a schedule through smoke season.
- Wipe the mantel, windowsills and the top of the stove surround every week in heating season.

When the film has had years to build

If soot or smoke film has settled on walls and ceilings across several winters, a deep clean or a restorative clean will do more than weekly wiping. We will tell you which one your home needs after we see it.

Sources

[1] Protect Yourself from Ash, U.S. EPA. https://www.epa.gov/wildfires/protect-yourself-ash

[2] Create a Clean Room to Protect Indoor Air Quality During a Wildfire, U.S. EPA. https://www.epa.gov/emergencies-iaq/create-clean-room-protect-indoor-air-quality-during-wildfire

[3] Home Heating, Oregon State Fire Marshal. https://www.oregon.gov/osfm/education/pages/home-heating.aspx

[4] Discard Ashes Safely, U.S. Fire Administration (FEMA). https://www.usfa.fema.gov/gallery/pictographs/pictograph43.html

[5] Best Wood Burning Practices, U.S. EPA (Burn Wise). https://www.epa.gov/burnwise/best-wood-burning-practices

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