

PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY:

Date: May 23, 2008

Contact: Robert L. Kennedy, Chief of Public Health
Phone: (831) 454-4000
Email: EOC010@co.santa-cruz.ca.us

IMPORTANCE OF SAFE WILDFIRE ASH CLEANUP

The Summit Fire has deposited large amounts of ash and burned residential structures in and outside of the areas of the wildfires. The residual ash condition will continue for several weeks, even after the wildfires are extinguished. To better inform County residents of possible dangers from contact with the ash, County Public Health is providing this advisory for the safe handling and disposal procedures for ash involved debris.

The ash deposited by forest fires is relatively nontoxic and similar to ash that might be found in your fireplace. However, ash will contain small amount of cancer causing chemicals and can be irritating to the skin, especially to those with sensitive skin. If the ash is inhaled, it can be irritating to the nose, throat and lungs and may cause coughing. Exposure to airborne ash may trigger asthmatic attacks in individuals who already have asthma. Therefore, in order to avoid possible health problems, the following steps are recommended:

- Do not allow children to play in the ash. Wash ash off toys before children play with them. Clean ash off house pets.
- Wear gloves, long sleeved shirts and long pants and avoid skin contact.
- If you do get ash on your skin, wash it off as soon as possible. Some wet ash can cause chemical burns.
- If you have a vegetable garden or fruit trees, wash the fruits or vegetables before eating them.
- Avoid getting ash into the air as much as possible. Do not use leaf blowers or take other actions that will put ash into the air.
- Shop vacuums and other common vacuum cleaners do not filter out small particles. They blow such particles out the exhaust into the air where they can be inhaled. The use of shop vacuums and other non-HEPA filter vacuums is not recommended. HEPA filter vacuums could be used, if available.

- Well fitting dust masks may provide some protection during cleanup. In general, many ash particles are larger than those found in smoke. Thus, wearing a dust mask can significantly reduce, but not completely eliminate, the amount of particles inhaled.
- Anyone with heart or lung disease should consult a physician before using a mask during post-fire cleanup.
- Gentle sweeping of indoor and outdoor hard surfaces followed by wet mopping is the best procedure in most cases. A damp cloth or wet mop may be all that is needed on lightly dusted areas.
- Avoid washing ash into storm drains as much as possible.
- Use as little water as possible to wet down ash.
- Collected ash may be disposed of in the regular trash. Ash may be stored in tied plastic bags or other containers that will prevent it from being disturbed.

Ash and debris inside burned structures may contain more toxic substances than forest fire ash because of the many synthetic materials present in buildings. Older buildings in particular may contain asbestos and lead. Professional assistance should be sought in the removal of ash and other debris from burned structures.

For more information on ash and debris cleanup, visit:

The California Environmental Protection agency's website at www.calepa.ca.gov/Disaster/Fire.

Or

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/wildfires/>