

FEMA Offers Tips for Safely Returning to a Fire- or Flood-Damaged Home

Release Date: Jul 13, 2024

Following the South Fork and Salt Fires and floods, many New Mexicans needed to leave their homes. Some are now returning to their property to learn the extent of their damage and the livability of their housing. When entering buildings damaged by flood or fire, your personal safety is always the highest priority.

Everyone is anxious to get back into their home after a disaster. If you evacuated, you may be worried about what you will find when you get back. But don't rush in when you arrive. There are certain precautions to follow if you find your home had damage. Be aware that your house may be weakened, or contaminated with mold or sewage, which can cause health risks for your family. Be aware of potential hazards.

Before You Go Inside

- Before entering your house, look outside for damaged power lines, gas lines, foundation cracks and other exterior damage. It may be too dangerous to enter the home until an inspector checks it out.
- Turn the main electrical power and water systems off until you or a professional can ensure that they are safe.
- **NEVER** turn the power on or off or use an electrical tool or appliance while standing in water.
- Smell for gas. If you smell natural gas or propane, or hear a hissing noise, leave immediately and contact the fire department.
- Check the ceiling and floor for signs of sagging. Water may be trapped in the ceiling or floors may be unsafe to walk on.
- Beware of rodents, snakes, insects, and other animals that may be on your property or in your home.

After a Fire



FEMA

Page 1 of 3

- Call your insurance agent as soon as possible to file a claim.
- Check for structural damage before entering your home to avoid being trapped in a building collapse.
- Never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.
- Avoid breathing in or touching hazardous materials. Risks in fire-damaged areas can include particulates, exposed asbestos, building materials containing lead, lead paint, glass, or chemical residues.
 - If water has been used to put out the fire, mold may also be an issue and should not be inhaled.
- Wear protective clothing (long-sleeve shirt, long pants, sturdy shoes or boots), disposable nitrile or latex gloves, safety goggles, and an N95 mask or face covering.
- Take photographs of your damaged items for insurance purposes.

Inside the House

Mold

If your home was flooded or had high humidity due to the disaster, assume there is mold growth. Exposure to mold may increase health risks for residents with asthma, allergies, or other breathing conditions.

- Open doors and windows. Let the house air out before staying inside for any length of time.
- For instructions on how to clean mold-infested areas, see resources from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Visit [Mold Clean Up Guidelines and Recommendations | Mold | CDC](#).
- Wear protective clothing, including rubber gloves and rubber boots.

When in Doubt, Throw it Out

- Throw out items that absorb water and cannot be cleaned or disinfected, e.g., mattresses, carpeting, cosmetics, stuffed animals, and baby toys.
- Remove all drywall and insulation that has been in contact with flood waters.
- Be careful when moving furnishings or debris since they may be waterlogged and heavier.



FEMA

Page 2 of 3

- Throw out all food, beverages and medicine exposed to flood waters and mud, including canned goods and containers with food or liquid that have been sealed shut.

Cleaning

- Clean hard surfaces (e.g., flooring, countertops, and appliances) thoroughly with hot water and soap or a detergent.
- Some cleaning solutions can cause toxic fumes and other hazards if mixed. If you smell a strong odor or your eyes water from the fumes or mixed chemicals, open a window and get out of your home.

Before making repairs or rebuilding, check with your local building department to see if a permit is required. For an in-depth look at safety precautions and clean-up methods, see the CDC website at [Clean Up Safely After a Disaster](#). Visit [Guidelines for Cleaning Safely After a Disaster | Natural Disasters | CDC](#).

Apply for FEMA Disaster Assistance

To be eligible for any FEMA Individual Assistance program, individuals, and homeowners in in the **Mescalero Apache Tribe and Lincoln, Otero, Rio Arriba and San Juan counties** can apply for FEMA. assistance using the following:

- Visiting disasterassistance.gov
- Calling the FEMA Helpline at 800-621-3362 or
- Using the [FEMA mobile app](#). If you use a relay service, such as video relay (VRS), captioned telephone or other service, give FEMA the number for that service.
- Residents can also apply in person at a Disaster Recovery Center. Use the Disaster Recovery Center Locator at <https://egateway.fema.gov/ESF6/DRCLocator> to find the centers closest to you. No appointment is needed.

For an accessible video on how to apply for assistance go to, [youtube.com/watch= WZGpWI2RCNw](https://youtube.com/watch=WZGpWI2RCNw).

