

A LifeCare[®] Digest on Coping With Wildfires

If you live in a rural or wooded area, at some point, your home or community may be threatened by a wildfire. Wildfires occur in almost all states, and are typically most likely to ignite during hot, dry weather, and especially during droughts. Most often, they are started by people (usually unintentionally) and spread quickly, jumping from brush to trees and sometimes even homes. Once a fire has started, damage to property, wildlife and natural resources can be devastating since wildfires are difficult to contain. This digest offers tips and strategies on how to prevent, prepare for and cope with a wildfire.

Note—The information in this digest is intended as a guideline only. Always follow any specific instructions provided by local authorities.

Preventing Wildfires

Unfortunately, wildfires are often caused by people. To protect yourself and your environment, contact your local fire department or forestry office for information on fire laws in your area—and strictly follow them. In addition, follow these wildfire safety practices:

- Report hazardous conditions that could cause a wildfire. For instance, if you see smoldering campfires or smoking hazards that are not properly extinguished, notify your local fire department immediately.
- If you must build a campfire, follow any posted or local rules or regulations. Also, keep the campfire small and build it away from overhanging branches, dry grass and leaves, and rotten stumps or logs. Scrape away litter or other burnable material within a 10-foot circle to keep the campfire from spreading. Keep plenty of water handy and make sure the fire is completely doused—stir it and douse it again to be sure—and the coals are cold (you should be able to feel them with your bare hand to be sure) before leaving.
- Where smoking is permitted, smoke only in clearings where there is at least three feet around you on all sides and grind out the cigarette, cigar or tobacco in the dirt, never on a stump or log.
- Follow all manufacturers' instructions when using lanterns, stoves or heaters outdoors. Always make sure they are completely cool before refueling and move the appliance to a new clearing before lighting it, especially if fuel spills when filling it. Never light lanterns, stoves or heaters inside a tent, trailer or camper and, if you move them inside, make sure there is adequate ventilation.
- If you must burn trash or debris, observe local regulations (it is not legal to do so in some communities; others have specific regulations) and do so safely. Do not burn on the ground where ashes or sparks can be blown around, rather use a container placed in a cleared area away from branches and overhead wires.
- Make sure your vehicle's spark arrester is working properly by checking with the dealer or a mechanic. If you use other equipment such as chain saws, generators, trail bikes, etc. in wooded areas, they too must be equipped with working spark arresters.

Protecting Your Family and Home From Fires

As a safety precaution, learn about your community's risk for wildfires by contacting your local emergency management office, planning and zoning department or forestry office. They can usually provide valuable information on how to safeguard your home and how to react when a wildfire threatens. In addition, the following safety tips may help:

- Install smoke detectors on each level of your home. Test them monthly and change batteries at least once a year.
- Make sure all family members know where the fire extinguisher is located and how to use it.
- Clean roofs and gutters regularly. Inspect chimneys at least twice a year and have them cleaned annually. Chimneys and stovepipes should also be equipped with spark arresters.
- Clear flammable shrubs, leaves, dead limbs and twigs within a 30-100 foot zone around your home, and from beneath porches and decks. Stack firewood at least 100 feet away and uphill from your home.
- Store flammable materials such as gasoline, oil, kerosene, turpentine, etc. in approved safety containers and away from the base of your home.
- Maintain a garden hose that can reach all areas of your home and identify another outside water source such as a hydrant, swimming pool, pond, etc. that can be utilized in case of fire.
- Consider investing in protective shutters or fire-resistant drapes.
- Develop an evacuation plan with your family. (Please refer to *A LifeCare® Digest on Emergency Preparedness* for specifics.)
- Assemble a disaster supplies kit that contains: a first aid kit, an emergency fund of cash, canned food and can opener, at least three gallons of water per person, a change of clothing and footwear, bedding and/or sleeping bags, a battery-powered radio and flashlights (including extra batteries) and any essential items for children, pets or elderly and/or disabled family members (medications, diapers, warm clothing, etc.).
- Talk to your insurance agent to make sure that all of your insurance policies are up to date and contain adequate coverage.
- Keep insurance policies, photographs of your home and valuables (for insurance purposes, should they be damaged or destroyed), legal documents and other valuables in a safe deposit box or fireproof and waterproof container.

When a Wildfire Threatens

If wildfires are threatening your community, listen regularly to your local radio or television stations for updated reports and evacuation information. In addition, take the following steps:

- Create an emergency plan with your family and make sure you all understand it. Makes plans for evacuation and care of pets as well.

- Back your car into the garage or park it facing the route of escape. Close garage and car doors and windows against smoke, leave the keys in the ignition and disconnect automatic garage door openers (in case of power failure) so you can make a fast getaway.
- Smoke and ash from the fires can cause poor air quality. Stay inside and use an air conditioner, preferably with an air filter, if you have health problems, especially asthma, emphysema, other lung problems or heart conditions. People who are not at risk for health problems should still be cautious and avoid exercising if the air is hazy and/or causes coughing or irritation.
- If possible, arrange to stay with a friend or relative in a safe area if you are instructed to evacuate.

If you are instructed to evacuate:

- Do so immediately. Go to designated community shelter areas and, if possible, notify a relative or friend in another part of the country of your plans and your whereabouts. Listen to instructions carefully and allow yourself as much time as possible.
- Wear protective clothing (i.e., sturdy shoes, cotton or wool pants and long-sleeved shirt, gloves and a handkerchief to cover your face) to prevent burns.
- Take your disaster supplies kit (as described above).
- Keep mobile phones and/or two-way radios handy to communicate in case of emergency.
- Choose an escape route as far as possible from the fire.

If you're sure you have time before you evacuate:

- Close windows, doors, vents, venetian blinds or non-combustible window coverings and heavy drapes. Remove flammable or lightweight curtains.
- Turn off gas at the meter and pilot lights (*Note*—You will need to have a professional turn the gas back on.)
- Open the fireplace damper and close fireplace screens.
- Turn on lights in each room to make your house more visible through heavy smoke.
- Seal attic and ground vents with plywood or commercially available seals.
- Connect the garden hose to outside taps. Wet the roof and/or place lawn sprinklers on the roof and near above ground fuel tanks. Wet or remove shrubs within 15 feet of your home.
- Move flammable patio furniture indoors.

Disaster Relief

In the aftermath of a fire, there will probably be many pressing issues to take care of, but it is essential that your first priority be your own safety—and that of your family. If you are in need of emergency services (shelter, clothing, food, money, etc.), contact one of the emergency hotlines listed in the *Emergency Resources* section at the end of this digest. In addition, safeguard yourself and your family by taking the following tips into consideration:

- Listen to a portable radio for information on shelters, helpful resources and safety advisories.
- Stay out of and away from damaged buildings. Return home only when authorities say it is safe. Children and pets should be constantly supervised.
- Be alert for potential hazards. Take extreme care when moving in an area damaged by fire.
- Cooperate with authorities. Whether you're asked to relinquish telephone lines, keep off emergency roads or given other directions, do your best to comply.
- Remember to help others who may require special assistance—children, the elderly and people with disabilities.

What to Do if Your Home Is Damaged or Destroyed

If there is a federal disaster declaration, a telephone “hotline” is usually made available to provide information about public, private and voluntary agency programs to help you recover from the fire.

When assessing the damage to your home, use extreme caution. Watch for hidden dangers: areas that are still hot, falling structures, sharp metal, and other potential hazards. If you have insurance, make a detailed list of the damages and contact your insurance representative as soon as possible. If you aren't able to call from your home, tell your agent where you can be reached—and try to be patient. Where there is extensive and widespread damage, insurance representatives usually handle claims on an as-needed basis, beginning with the most serious situations. Property insurance typically protects against the financial loss due to damages incurred to real and/or personal property, but policies vary, and many have exclusions. Read your policy carefully and contact your agent with specific questions about coverage or the claims process. In addition, the following tips may help:

- Consider hiring a reliable contractor to make repairs—but beware of frauds who prey on disaster victims. Your best bet is to get a reference from friends, neighbors or co-workers who have had improvement work done. Get written estimates from several firms. Ask for explanations for price variations. Don't automatically choose the lowest bidder. Be sure to get a signed contract from any contractor you agree to work with.
- Take pictures of the damage—both to the house and your possessions—for insurance purposes.
- Make temporary repairs to prevent further damage from rain, wind or looting.
- Keep all repair receipts for your insurance agent.
- If you have to rebuild your home, check local building codes and ordinances to find out about fire-resistant designs and noncombustible materials that may help reduce the damaging effects of wildfires in the future. For example, using fire-resistant shingles, or replacing vinyl siding with other materials, like stucco, that are less likely to melt.

Emergency Resources

Numerous shelters are typically set up in the event of a natural disaster. To find the shelter nearest you, check your local newspaper, contact your local Red Cross chapter or emergency management service, or call one of the hotlines below. In addition, some of these organizations may be able to provide temporary housing or financial aid to families who have lost their homes.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): 800-462-9029
(or 800-462-7585 for the hearing- and speech-impaired)

Red Cross Hotline: 800-HELP-NOW (800-435-7669)

Please refer to other publications in the LifeCare[®] education series for more information on related topics.

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