

# Strategies for Cleaning Hazardous Settled Dust after a Smoke Event

## Settled Dust After a Large-Scale, Urban Fire Event

Traditional household dust consists of a mixture of dead skin, pet dander, dust mites, food debris, fibers, bacteria, dirt, pollen, absorbed chemicals, and particulate matter. Much of this originates from indoor material shedding, indoor processes such as smoking, cleaning, and cooking, the presence of pets, excessive moisture, and incomplete dust removal during cleaning. After a large-scale urban fire event, such as a wildfire that spreads to an urban area or an explosion, a more complex and hazardous mixture of dust laden with contaminants can settle within nearby homes and businesses. This hazardous dust may contain persistent organic pollutants, metals, endocrine disruptors, and more. A recent study has shown that PFAS substances can be found in residential dust associated with indoor furnishings. The CDC reports that PFAS have been found in the blood of approximately 97% of the U.S. population.

Since the majority of a household's dust (approximately 60%) comes from the outside through windows, doors, and vents, and even on the soles of shoes, it is important to take additional steps to safeguard a home or business from potential contaminants in the aftermath of such an event. Dust can maintain a long memory of the specific pollutants introduced, serving as a continuous source of exposure for residents. Therefore, taking additional steps to "clean" the air inside and frequently remove settled dust from surfaces can be important steps in minimizing exposure risks.

*Cleaning is especially important for households with infants and toddlers because they frequently play or crawl on the floor, exhibit hand-to-mouth behavior, and typically spend over 90% of their time indoors. Children are also more sensitive than adults to many contaminants found in dust.*

## STEPS TO MINIMIZE POTENTIAL EXPOSURE

- 1. Gather the appropriate cleaning products and equipment.** The right cleaning materials are critical when performing both an initial deep clean and routine cleaning.
  - Use microfiber or anti-static cloths, mops, and dusters. These products contain both positively- and negatively-charged fibers that attract and remove dust without the use of chemicals found in common dusting sprays. An alternative can be a wet cloth or mop.
  - Use vacuums with HEPA filtration to help remove smaller particles. These vacuums also frequently come with a variety of attachments that can be used on different surfaces and in hard-to-reach places.
  - Install new air filters in the HVAC system with the highest rating possible (MERV 11 and above).
  - Consider a standalone air cleaner for particle removal.
  - Consider water filtration cartridges for the removal of particle and chemical contaminants from fire emissions or thermally degraded water lines.
- 2. Clean the air.** Unlike surface cleaning, air cleaning is a continuous process to remove airborne contaminants. While a home or building's HVAC system typically cleans the air, in the aftermath of a large-scale urban fire event, supplemental air cleaning may also be needed.
  - Use the HVAC system in recirculation mode so that outside air is not brought in until it has been verified that the outdoor air is free of the fire contamination.
  - Use the highest rated minimum efficiency reporting value (MERV) filter in the HVAC system. MERV 11 or above is recommended.
  - Use standalone portable air cleaners if available. They should have verified HEPA filtration, activated charcoal filtration, and a clean air delivery rate (CADR) equivalent to 2/3 or the size of the room where it is being operated. Follow the manufacturer's instructions and clean the device often. Make sure that the standalone air cleaner does not introduce ozone into the space.



- If standalone air cleaners are not available or economically feasible, consider Do-It-Yourself (DIY) air cleaners. Making your own air cleaner with a simple box fan, tape, and HVAC air filters can be a more affordable option, (see [AN 200: Strategies to Protect Air Quality During Wildfires: Considerations for Do-It-Yourself Filtration](#) for more information).
  - Limit additional indoor particle generation processes such as frying, gas cooking, use of air fresheners, and use of cleaning chemicals.
3. **Remove dust from surfaces.** Since dust recirculates in the air, it can continuously deposit on surfaces. Routinely removing this dust is critical to minimizing exposure risks.
    - **Hard surfaces.** Use a microfiber cloth/duster or damp cloth on furniture, countertops, baseboards, fan blades, windowsills, light fixtures, blinds, and electronics. Remember to hand- or machine-wash all cloths with warm water after use.
    - **Floors.** For hardwood, tile, or vinyl floors, vacuum or dust first, and then clean with a wet microfiber mop. Clean carpet and rugs with a vacuum with HEPA filtration.
    - **Closets.** To minimize buildup of dust in closets, keep out-of-season or seldomly worn items in plastic totes or hanging bags. Use a vacuum (with HEPA filtration) on all hanging clothing before use.
    - **Upholstered furniture, bedding and curtains.** If possible, use a vacuum (with HEPA filtration) attachment on mattresses, comforters, curtains, and upholstered furniture. Wash bedding weekly in hot water. If an item can't be laundered, consider getting it dry cleaned.
  4. **Limit the entry of additional contaminants.**
    - **Close windows and doors.** Avoid natural ventilation in the weeks after the event, such as opening a window to air out a room. Consider sealing any leaks in doors and windows.
    - **Walk off mats.** Utilize walk off mats at doorways and remove shoes upon entrance. This will limit the entry of additional contaminants.
    - **Source control.** Some cleaning products may introduce additional pollutants, such as volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and semi-volatile organic compounds (SVOCs) into the indoor environment. Only use cleaning products that have been independently verified to be low-emitting.
  5. **Practice good hand hygiene, especially after cleaning.** Frequent hand washing can reduce the ingestion of hazardous dust that can result from touching dust and then touching your face. While more common among children, even adults can lower exposure risks through frequent hand washing.
  6. **Establish a plan and keep to it.** Be proactive and don't just clean when you see dust beginning to settle. Set up a routine cleaning schedule for the weeks and months to follow to continuously remove dust from potential recirculation.