



Home fire safety fact sheet

Cleaning Up After a Fire

A house fire is a devastating personal tragedy and its effect upon you and your family should not be underestimated.

The following information is provided by the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS) to provide practical advice after the fire.

Your Safety

After the fire has been extinguished there is always a danger that part or all of the building may collapse, and toxic gases may be present in dangerous quantities for some time. You may hear noises coming from the burnt area. These noises are caused by the cooling down of materials that have been heated by the fire. Brick walls, for example, will stay warm for hours.

The MFS will provide advice regarding significant risks and dangers that have been identified following the fire. **Do not enter the property without clearance from the fire officer in charge or the senior police officer present.**

Cautions

The fire service may have disconnected the gas, water and electricity supplies to your home.

Household wiring, gas and water supply lines may have been damaged in the fire. It is your responsibility to have the services checked by a licensed tradesperson before they are reconnected.

Do not attempt to reconnect the services yourself.

Food, drink and medicines that have been exposed to heat, smoke or soot should be discarded in an appropriate manner.

Coping Emotionally

The stress caused by a fire can often trigger existing illnesses and conditions. Adults and children may begin to feel anxious or depressed. If you feel that, you or any of your family are having difficulty in coping contact your doctor or one of the counselling services listed under the heading below "Useful phone numbers" as soon as possible.

Securing and Leaving Your Home

You will need to protect the building from any further damage by weather, theft or vandalism.

The fire service will secure the property as best they can but it is your responsibility to see that openings are covered against rain and unauthorised entry. Make sure that outside doors to the building are locked or secured.

If you are insured, contact your insurance company as soon as possible to discuss security.

If you are renting the house

Contact your letting agent or landlord and inform them of the fire. If you can not contact them and you need professional assistance in boarding up the premises, refer to the telephone directory for a local building contractor.

If you are an SA Housing Authority tenant

Contact the 24 hour Maintenance Centre on 13 12 88.

Provided that it is safe to enter the building, try to locate the following to take with you:

- identification – passports, birth certificates
- vital medicines such as blood pressure regulating drugs or insulin, as long as they are not damaged by the fire
- eyeglasses, hearing aids, prosthetic devices or personal aids
- wallets, purses, credit cards, money and valuable jewellery
- banking details
- mobile phones, computers and laptops

Insurance

Contact your insurance company or agent as soon as possible to report the loss and give a forwarding address and telephone number if you have had to relocate.

You may be entitled to stay in temporary accommodation as part of your insurance cover, or you may be able to get an advance on your insurance claim settlement.

The insurance company will use an insurance assessor to carry out an inspection, so the sooner the insurer is contacted the quicker the claim can be processed.

As soon as possible make a list of items either inside or outside the buildings which have been damaged by the fire. Do not throw away any damaged goods as the insurance assessor may need to view them.

Document and keep all receipts for any money you spend. These are important as proof to show the insurance company what money you have spent as a result of the fire.

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If you are unable to remember the name of your insurance company contact the Insurance Council of Australia on 1300 728 228.

If you are not insured contact either family or friends for assistance, or call Emergency Housing on 1800 003 308 for emergency accommodation. SA Housing Authority customers should contact 13 12 88.

Useful Phone Numbers

SA Metropolitan Fire Service

- in an emergency 000
- Community Safety & Resilience 1300 737 637

South Australia Police

- emergency calls only 000
- for assistance & attendance 13 14 44

SA Ambulance

- in an emergency 000
- general business 1300 136 272

SA Power Networks (electricity)

- faults and emergencies 13 13 66

Gas

- Australian Gas Networks 1800 427 532

SA Water

- service problems & faults 1300 883 121
- customer service 1300 650 950

Housing

- Emergency housing 1800 003 308
- SA Housing Authority 13 12 99

Legal advice

- Law Society 8229 0200
- Legal Services Commission 1300 366 424

Insurance

- Insurance Council of Australia 1300 728 228

Pets

- contact your local vet
- RSPCA Lonsdale 1300 477 722

Counselling

- Crisis care 4pm – 9pm & 24 hours on weekends 13 16 11
- Beyond Blue 1300 224 636
- Lifeline 13 11 14

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Address Change

If you have to re-locate you will need to notify a range of people about your change of address. A comprehensive checklist can be found at:

<https://info.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/family-and-community/change-my-address>

You should begin by notifying:

- Insurance companies
- Financial institutions
- Employer
- Family, friends and neighbours
- Local post office – to hold or forward mail
- Phone and internet suppliers
- Gas, electricity and water suppliers
- Police, if the fire is under investigation
- Children's schools
- Australian Electoral Commission
- Centrelink if you receive a government allowance
- Medicare
- Pet microchip registry
- Transport SA – drivers licence, motor vehicle registration
- your superannuation provider.

Cleaning Hints

First check with your insurance company, leasing agent, or property owner prior to commencing any work. They may wish to inspect your property before anything is moved or cleaned.

You will find listings for commercial cleaning contractors on the internet or in the Yellow Pages phone directory.

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Clothing

Smoke odour and soot can sometimes be washed out of clothes. The following formula will often work for clothes that can be bleached:

- 25g Sugar Soap
- 250ml household chlorine bleach product
- 4 litres **cold** water

Mix this solution well, add clothes, wash well, rinse with clean water and dry.

To remove mildew, wash the stain with soap and water, rinse again and dry in the sun. If the stain is still there, try lemon juice and salt or a diluted solution of household bleach. Colour test garments before using any treatment. Take **wool, silk** or **rayon** garments to the Dry Cleaner as soon as possible.

Caution

*Keep all bleach and sugar soap solutions away from children and pets.
Wear eye protection and gloves when mixing and using the solution.*

Food

If in doubt ... throw it out!

Wash canned goods in detergent and warm water. If labels come off, mark the contents of the can with a waterproof pen or a grease pencil. Discard canned goods if they are rusted, discoloured by heating or show signs of bulging.

If your freezer has stopped running, it may be possible to salvage the food, depending on the severity of the fire, its proximity to the freezer, the length of time the power has been cut and the weather. Keep the freezer door closed and contact an Environmental Health Officer at your local council for advice.

If there is any doubt about defrosted foodstuffs then do not take risks: throw it out.

Refrigerators and Freezers

To remove odour from your refrigerator or freezer, wash the inside with a solution of baking soda and water or use 250ml of vinegar or household ammonia to 4 litres of water.

Caution

When discarding any fridge or freezer, be sure to remove doors or locks to prevent a child becoming trapped inside whilst playing.

Floors and Carpets

Use flax or linseed soap on wood and vinyl floors, strip and then re-wax, repeat if necessary. Carpets should be steam cleaned and shampooed, repeat if necessary. If carpets are heavily soiled, discard and replace. See "Carpet repairers and restorers" listing in a business telephone directory.

Walls and Furniture

The burning of materials produces smoke which contains carbon particles. These particles settle on solid surfaces such as shelves, ledges and furniture. They can best be removed by using a vacuum cleaner.

These particles will infiltrate curtains and soft furnishings, including carpets. Curtains can be gently vacuum cleaned whilst in position and carpets may respond to similar treatment, but be very careful that the cleaning head does not rub and smudge the black carbon deposits.

The introduction of thorough ventilation by opening as many windows as possible, for as long as possible, is the most effective method of removing the smell.

Thoroughly clean and/or replace all air conditioning and heating ducts and filters.

Wallpaper

Generally, wallpaper cannot be restored and has to be replaced.

Painted Walls

To remove soot and smoke stains:

Mix 80 – 100ml Sugar Soap with 4 litres of water in a bucket.

Using protective glasses and rubber gloves, wash a small area at a time. Since soot will deposit on the ceiling and upper parts of walls, work from the ceiling down. Rinse thoroughly and apply a sealer to walls and ceilings before painting. Paint manufacturers can advise the best product for your circumstances.

Caution

Keep sugar soap solution away from children and pets.

Mattresses, Quilts and Pillows

It is almost impossible to remove smoke odours from feathers and foam products. These items should be either discarded or aired for long periods to try to remove the smell of smoke. A mattress company could renovate a mattress as an alternative to disposal or replacement.

Leather Products

Wipe leather goods with a damp cloth, then a dry cloth and dry in the shade. Stuff shoes and purses with newspaper to help retain shape and stop shrinking.

Locks and Hinges

Locks should be dismantled, wiped clean, oiled and repaired, or at least sprayed with a lubricating spray. Hinges should be thoroughly cleaned and oiled.