



Interior Health

IMPORTANT HEALTH & SAFETY INFORMATION FOR RESIDENTS RETURNING HOME

Exposure to Smoke from Forest Fires

Smoke conditions and local air quality levels can change quickly due to the unpredictable nature of forest fires. The location of air monitoring stations and wind direction of smoke can have a major impact on air quality measures like the Air Quality and Health Index. <http://www.airhealthbc.ca/> People with heart or lung conditions may be more sensitive to the effects of smoke and should watch for any change in symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure. If any symptoms are noted, affected individuals should take steps to reduce their exposure to smoke and if necessary see their physician. People with symptoms should go to their health care provider, walk-in clinic or emergency department depending on severity of symptoms.

Reducing Exposure to Smoke

- Use common sense regarding outdoor physical activity – if your breathing becomes difficult or uncomfortable, stop or reduce the activity.
- Stay cool and drink plenty of fluids.
- Smoke levels may be lower indoors, however levels of smoke particles will still be higher than normal. If you stay indoors be aware of your symptoms.
- Consider visiting a location like a shopping mall with cooler filtered air. Keep in mind that staying indoors may help you stay cool and provide some relief from the smoke, however many air conditioning systems do not filter the air or improve indoor air quality.
- Keep indoor air cleaner by avoiding smoking or burning other materials.
- You may be able to reduce your exposure to smoke by moving to cleaner air. Conditions can vary dramatically by area and elevation.
- Residents with asthma or other chronic illness should activate their asthma or personal care plan.
- Pay attention to local air quality reports, air quality may be poor even though smoke may not be visible.
- Commercially available HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters can further reduce poor indoor air quality near the device.

Food Safety when you lose power:

If you are affected by a power outage, there are steps you can take to prevent food spoilage. Drinking water quality can also be compromised from power outages, contact your water supplier if you have questions.

- If a generator powered refrigeration unit is available, transfer food to the unit.
- If a powered refrigeration unit is not available, leave food in the refrigerator or freezer and keep the door closed.
- **Food safety when the power returns:**
- Ideally fridge temperatures should remain at 4 degrees Celsius or below and foods in the freezer should remain frozen solid.
- A refrigerator can keep food cool for up to 12 hours and a freezer can keep food safe for days if it is kept closed.
- If you don't have a thermometer or if you don't know how long your fridge was without power:

- Check the products in the fridge for spoilage and souring. Milk and other dairy products that have gone off/sour are good indicators that the fridge has been off and all food should be discarded.
- If frozen foods have thawed, they may not be safe to eat and must be discarded.
- Food in the freezer that has or may have reached 4C or higher should be discarded and must not re-frozen.
- Thawed and refrozen ice cream may be a good indicator that helps to determine whether the freezer has been off. Fish product that is malodorous on thawing is also a good sign.
- If there has been an extended power outage it may be necessary to contact your insurance provider. Make a list of items discarded and photograph these items if possible for insurance purposes.
- Extra precautions should apply to ready to eat foods.

Garden Food Crops

Fire retardants currently being used in the fire fighting efforts are relatively low risk chemicals to both the environment and to public health.

- Interior Health recommends that fruit and vegetable garden crops grown for personal consumption:
 - NOT be consumed if they have been directly impacted by fire retardants.
 - BE THOROUGHLY WASHED before consumption if they were not directly hit by spray but were grown in an area where spray was applied.
- For crops that may have been impacted and are intended for sale, contact the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands or your local Environmental Health Officer with enquiries.

If in doubt throw it out. Do not take any chances with the safety of your food.

Water Quality

Make sure your water is safe. Contact your water supplier or check their web site to see if there is a public notification in place. Visit <http://www.interiorhealth.ca/health-and-safety.aspx?id=536> Community water systems where fires occur and fire retardants are used in their watershed area will have increased monitoring and scrutiny for changes in water quality. Public notifications will be issued if there is some level of risk or uncertainty associated with drinking water use. Private surface and ground water sources affected by fire retardant application may show increased levels of nitrates. Private water systems can be sampled to ensure compliance with the Canadian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines for nitrates (45 mg/L nitrate or 10mg/L as nitrate-nitrogen). Sample bottles can be provided by water testing laboratories. To find a lab near you consult your yellow pages under laboratories – analytical.

Septic tanks and disposal fields

In most instances, fire will not affect septic tanks or the sewage disposal. In extreme cases the piping network may be damaged by heat. Operation of the system should be observed by the homeowner to ensure it is functioning properly. Check with your local Registered Onsite Wastewater Practitioner (ROWP). A list can be obtained at <http://www.bcoffa.com/rowp.html>

For more information contact your Environmental Health Officer at your local Health Centre. http://www.interiorhealth.ca/uploadedFiles/Health_and_Safety/Contacts/IHHHowtoFindUs823517.pdf