Fire & Water Damage Dos and Don'ts

Homes Affected in Proximity of Fire:
If your house did suffer fire damage, here are basic tips to help get your home back to normal.

Do's:

- Open windows for ventilation, weather permitting. Enhance air exchange by placing fans in windows and opening doors.
- Cover carpeted traffic areas with towels or old linens to prevent additional soiling. When soot and residue are visible on chrome trim faucets and other fixtures clean and protect by washing with detergent and applying a light coating of Vaseline or oil. This will protect items from further corrosion.
- Wipe residue from porcelain bath fixtures to prevent etching.
- Change the air filter on your furnace if it uses forced hot air.
- Tape cheesecloth over air vents to capture any loose soot in the air. This is even more effective if the cheesecloth is damp.
- Blow off, brush or vacuum (with brush attachment) loose smoke particles from upholstery, draperies and carpeting.
- Empty refrigerators and freezers if electricity is shut off, and prop doors open to allow air circulation.
- Remove pets to a clean environment when heavy fire residue is present. Pets should be bathed with traditional pet shampoo to remove any unwanted dirt.
- Send sample garments to a dry cleaner for cleaning and deodorization if odor is present.
- Wipe the leaves of house plants to remove smoke residue.
- If needed, do board up open windows, roofs, or other open areas in order to prevent additional damage.
- Individuals with a medical conditions or chemical sensitivities should move to a clean environment if they experience dizziness or nausea. Should symptoms persist seek medical attention.

Don'ts:

- Do not enter the building unless you are sure that it is structurally sound and that there are no hazards such as broken glass, spilled chemicals, and exposed wires, etc. Always think safety!
- Do not delay in getting the area cleaned. The longer corrosive gasses from the fire are in contact with surfaces such as metals, the more likely those surfaces will be damaged.
- Don’t touch anything with your bare hands. Oil from your hands can permeate upholstery, walls and woodwork, causing additional damage.
- Do not use ceiling fixtures if the ceiling is wet. A short circuit could result.
- Don’t attempt to wash any papered or flat painted walls. Incorrect cleaning procedures could make matters worse.
- Don’t walk on carpet that has soot or put your hands on soot covered surfaces. This will tend to make the soot drive into these porous surfaces and make cleaning much more difficult.
• Do not wet clean soot covered surfaces especially porous surfaces such as lampshades, wall board and ceiling tiles.
• Don't start your AV system until it has been checked. If there is soot in the duct work, the air movement will spread the soot around the entire building.
• Do not use electrical appliances that have been close to fire or water before having them checked. They could malfunction.
• Do not eat food that has been exposed to fire or smoke.

Homes impacted by the affects of the fire:
Even if your house didn't suffer actual fire damage, smoke from the fire can create problems in your house and on your property. Here are basic tips.

Exterior:

• Pressure wash, scrub or clean all exterior surfaces including walls, walks, drives, decks, window and deck screens, etc. Most pressure washers can be rented or are available for purchase through home improvement stores.
• Clean smoke-covered windows by adding one part rubbing alcohol to five parts window cleaner.
• If aerial fire retardant or firefighting foam residue is present on your home or vehicles, use a mild detergent and brushes to scrub and dilute the dried residue; rinse with clean water. A follow-up with pressure washing may be beneficial but will not replace scrubbing to remove the residue.
• Ash and soot on the ground and vegetation will continue to generate smoke odors. Use a garden hose to gently spray residue from vegetation.

Interior:

• Wash all interior walls and hard surfaces with mild soap or other appropriate cleaning solutions or products, and rinse thoroughly. Don't forget inside cabinets, drawers and closets. Always test your cleaning process on a small, inconspicuous area to determine effectiveness.
• Launder or dry clean all clothing.
• Wash, dust or otherwise clean all household items, including knick-knacks. Clean and deodorize carpets, window coverings, upholstered furniture and mattresses using commercially available cleaning solutions or products.
• Treat upholstery, fabric window treatments, etc. with deodorizing products available at most supermarkets.
• Change filters when you first return to the premises and at least once a month for the first year.
• Inspect heating, ventilating and air conditioning units and all ductwork. If soot, ash and smoke residue are found have these areas professionally cleaned before use.

Tips for odor removal:

• Increase air flow by opening windows, turning on fans or even putting particularly smelly items outside.
• Remove minor smoke film from washable surfaces by using a solution of heavy-duty cleaner or degreaser and a dash of water-soluble deodorizer from a local supermarket or home improvement store.
• If the smoke film is heavy on a washable item, locate a dry cleaner that offers ozone treatment. An easy way to locate these suppliers is through Certified Restoration Dry Cleaning Network (www.crdn.com).
• To clean smoke-covered windows, add one part rubbing alcohol to five parts window cleaner.
• Light smoke film on acoustic ceiling tile can be removed by professional ceiling cleaners, but heavy buildup requires replacement of the tile. If you consider painting, remember that painting removes the acoustic properties of these tiles.
• Clean carpets to remove smoke odor. Either rent a carpet steam cleaner and clean the carpets yourself or hire a professional. If you hire a professional ask if they use environmentally-responsible products for carpet cleaning.
• Upholstered furniture, draperies and carpeting can be wet- or dry-cleaned, as appropriate, after a thorough vacuuming, with water-soluble deodorizer added to the cleaning solution to control residual smoke odor.
• For large areas, fill small dishes with vanilla, vinegar or activated charcoal for an easy, inexpensive smoke eater. Or, you can purchase odor neutralizer from a supermarket which should work for effectively.
• Use baking soda to get rid of smoke odor. Dust the furniture and the carpets with the baking soda and let settle for a day or so. Then vacuum it up and repeat the process a few more times over the course of a week.
• Change the filter in the air and/or heat circulation systems.
• If odor is overwhelming or does not dissipate, seek professional help.

**Water Damage:**

Water damage often accompanies fire and smoke damage, because water is most often used to extinguish fires. Also, intense fires can result in broken pipes. The appropriate treatment for water damage depends on the nature of the damage. Some water carries contaminants and should be considered hazardous (See “Sewage and Flood Damage”). Whatever the origin, the prospects of restoration depend largely on the speed with which your building and personal property can be dried. Even clean water can generate mildew and other bacterial growth if neglected.

**Do’s**

• Stay out of rooms where ceilings sag from retained water.
• Ventilate wet areas. Turn on air conditioning for accelerated drying in summer; in winter alternate cycles of opened windows and heating.
• Remove wet area rugs, carpets and other floor coverings.
• Remove lamps, telephones and decorative items from wet furniture tops.
• Transport computers to a dry environment, remove from cases and blow dry with low pressure air.
• Remove standing water from surfaces by mopping, sponging and blotting.
• Place aluminum foil squares, china saucers or wood blocks under furniture legs to avoid carpet staining.
• Move photos, paintings, and art objects to a safe, dry location.
- Remove wet fabrics and dry them as soon as possible. Hang furs and leather goods to dry separately at room temperature.
- Lift draperies off carpet, loop through a coat hanger, and place the hanger on the drapery rod.
- Prop up wet furniture cushions for even drying and place small wood blocks or aluminum foil under furniture legs.
- Open furniture drawers, cabinet drawers, closet doors, and luggage to enhance drying.
- Do not force open stuck drawers or doors.
- Remove damp books from shelves and spread out to dry. If time is not permitting, freeze valuable books and documents to retard mildew growth until drying can be performed.
- Wipe furniture dry.
- If damage occurs during a cool season, leave heat on; if in summer, use an air conditioner if available.

**Don’ts**

- Do not use heat to dry closed building interiors; mildew and expanded moisture damage may result.
- Do not use an ordinary household vacuum to remove water.
- Do not use electrical appliances while on wet carpet or wet floors.
- Beware of wet concrete. Serious injuries may occur on slippery surfaces.
- Do not go into rooms with standing water if the electricity is still on.
- Do not lift tacked down carpet without professional help. Lifting the carpet incorrectly could promote shrinkage.
- Do not wait to call for professional help. Proper drying within the first few hours greatly diminishes damage from water and bacteria growth. Damage from the water and bacteria growth can begin within hours.