



It's no secret that wildfires are wreaking havoc on communities, displacing families, and even destroying homes and lives. And it seems to be getting worse. In fact, one recent study showed that nearly 5 million homes in the U.S. are at a 'high or extreme' risk from wildfires. Needless to say, things are really heating up.

If you happen to live in **a wildfire-prone state**, it's especially important to learn the latest tips and tricks to stay safe when the flames erupt. If you're wondering, the states most in peril are California, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, Washington, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming. That said, states like Florida, Tennessee, Georgia, Kansas and North Carolina are by no means immune to wildfire danger.

Not to worry! Our experts are here to help. This all-in-one guide delivers the essential strategies and tactics to keep you safe from wildfire — no matter where you live.

Expert Quotes on Wildfire Safety



Daniel Berlant | ASSISTANT DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF CAL FIRE

"You don't want to open the door and get out and panic at the very last minute as the fire is approaching, because you're not going to be able to outrun a fire."



Marci Claude | GATLINBURG CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGER

"Working jointly with Tennessee Division of Forestry, the Gatlinburg Fire Department has spearheaded efforts to educate Gatlinburg citizens on how to implement Firewise practices at home. The Department has hosted two outreach events and is working with local neighborhoods on becoming Firewise communities."



Joe Page | WHITEFISH (MONT.) FIRE CHIEF

"During an emergency is not the time for you and your spouse to have discussions about what's important to fit in the car and what's not."



Kory Honea | BUTTE COUNTY (CALIF.) SHERIFF

"We have to check with our partners here to make sure that it's safe for people to go back in. That's when we say it's safe, because if we don't do this, people could die."





Safety Preparation Before a Wildfire Occurs

Take steps now so that if a wildfire breaks out, you and your property are in better shape to get through it. The first thing is to sign up for your community's warning system alerts. [The Emergency Alert System](#) and the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Weather Radio](#) also alert the public to wildfires and other dangers.



- ✓ Fire-resistant materials around your home and property for repairs, renovations and building
- ✓ Low-combustible materials for gates, walls and landscaping to act as a barrier against fire
- ✓ Noncombustible outdoor furniture
- ✓ Decks, porches, gutters and eaves clear of leaves, debris, pine cones and tree bark
- ✓ An outdoor water source and hose that can get water to any area of your property
- ✓ An emergency plan
- ✓ Insurance coverage that is adequate to replace your property
- ✓ Hydrated and maintained yards
- ✓ Keeping brown grass cut
- ✓ Quick disposal of lawn cuttings and debris
- ✓ Wire mesh around exterior attic vents, decks and patios
- ✓ Trees pruned to make the lowest branches 6 to 10 feet from the ground

- ✗ Firewood, propane tanks and other flammable materials within **30 feet** of your home, shed and other structures you want to survive a wildfire (ideally, they'd be at least 100 feet away)
- ✗ Dead vegetation within 10 feet of the house (check under your porches and decks!)
- ✗ Loose shingles or roof tiles

What to Include in Your Emergency Plan

Developing an emergency plan is a key part of wildfire safety preparation. Include the following essentials in your plan:



At least two evacuation routes for everyone in your family (and practice them!)



Considerations for pets and livestock



How Various Groups Can Help

As you undertake wildfire safety precautions, groups such as your local fire department and zoning office can help. Here's how.



Local fire department: Get in touch for preparedness and evacuation tips and to get an idea of how the department would respond to your neighborhood if a wildfire occurs.



Planning/zoning office: Ask about the wildfire risk level of your home and if there are any ordinances you should be aware of (for example, **Cal Fire mandates** that easily combustible vegetation be kept at least 100 feet from walls and that new builds near forests and wilderness must be made of fire-resistant materials).



Homeowners association: Reach out to learn about building materials, landscape designs and home designs.

Safety during a Wildfire

In some cases, a wildfire may take your area **by surprise**, as the 2018 Camp Fire did with Paradise, California. You may be told to evacuate immediately—**do it!** Any reluctance to leave may prove fatal.

However, you do get some warning in many situations. For example, fires may have been raging in your general area for a few days or weeks, and you're aware that you may need to evacuate at some point. In those cases, keep an eye on conditions, and get ready to evacuate should the need arise.



Listen regularly to local alert systems, NOAA Weather Radio and EAS.



Move outdoor furniture, door mats, potted plants in wooden basins and the like inside or move them as far away from your house as you can.



Leave immediately if given evacuation orders. Ideally, you would evacuate before orders go out so that firefighters have time to get into place and you have a better chance of survival.



Connect water hoses.



Close all vents, doors, windows, garage doors and pet doors so embers don't get into your house.

Evacuating can mean spending lots of time in your vehicle waiting for traffic to move. If possible, evacuate in a vehicle that can hold lots of gas and that can withstand the waiting. Evacuate away from the fire and away from the direction it is moving. Aim for wide roads if feasible because narrow roads can easily become blocked. Keep your vehicle's doors unlocked and the headlights on. In smoky conditions, close all windows, and switch off ventilation fans.

Sheltering in Place

Sometimes, evacuation isn't safe, for example, when your only evacuation routes would take you into the fire or when the fire is moving too quickly/is too close that you don't have the time to safely evacuate. Other scenarios in which you shouldn't evacuate: If you can't see where you're going due to smokiness or if your escape routes are too congested or blocked. Emergency personnel may also recommend that you stay.

However, some houses and structures aren't safe for sheltering in place. In those cases, make plans with neighbors to evacuate to their safer house should the need arise.

Do any of the following sound like your home? If yes, your home is an unsafe shelter.



Trees or thick grass grow right next to the home.



Brush piles, wood sheds or wood piles are right next to the home.



Thick shrubs are near sliding glass doors and windows.

How to Shelter in Place



Turn off the house's propane or natural gas.



Wet the yard and roof with a sprinkler..



Move fabric-covered furniture away from windows and doors..



Close all inside doors to slow the spread of fire inside the house..

After the fire passes through and the thick smoke has cleared, heed any radio instructions for what to do. Check the rooms of the house as well as its exterior and the roof. Also check below decks and around fences. Put out any fires, sparks or embers. Avoid opening any interior doors that feel hot, and stay away from fragile trees and downed power lines. Wear long pants, long-sleeved shirts and gloves made of cotton or wool.

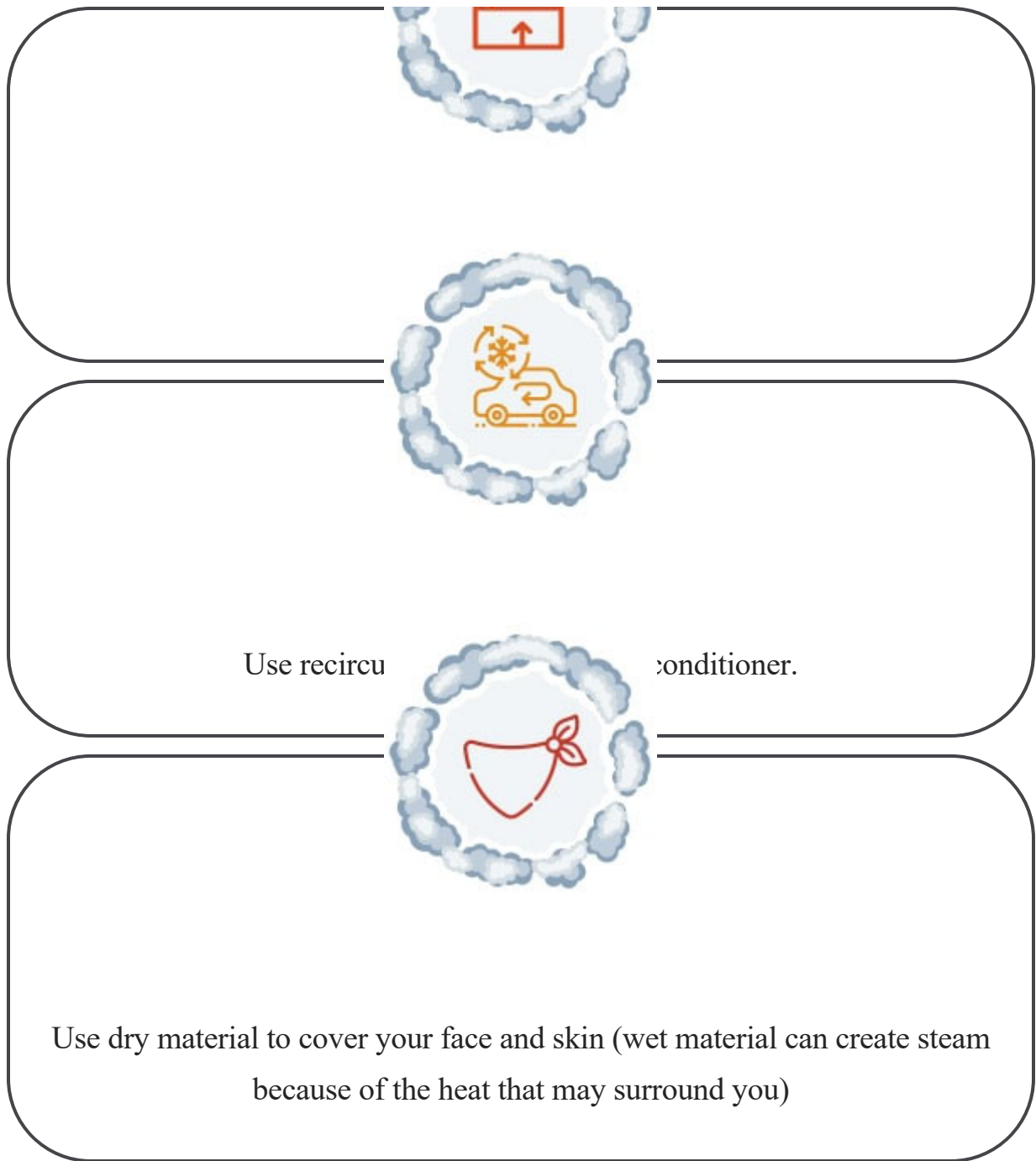
Driving in a Wildfire

Many people who perish in wildfires do so in vehicles. One reason is because they wait too long to evacuate or they think that their vehicle can move faster than a wildfire. However, wildfires have the ability to leapfrog and hopscotch obstacles. Another reason people die in vehicles is due to the conditions—debris on the road, poor visibility and high evacuee traffic, for example.

However, if you find yourself driving or in a vehicle during a wildfire, you **do have options:**



Turn your headlights and hazard lights on.



How to Avoid the Flames



Park in an area where there are no objects such as trees and debris to feed flames. If possible, locate a



solid object such as a concrete wall to act as a barrier between you and the flames.



Get below the windows.



Keep the engine running.



Exit only after the wall of fire has passed.

Your tires might explode, but stay inside the car. If you get out, you'll never be able to stay ahead of the fire. Also, bring wool blankets instead of synthetic blankets because wool isn't as flammable.

On Foot in a Wildfire

If you're **on foot** in a wildfire, find a space with no vegetation and flammable material, and get as low as possible like in a ditch. Lie with your face down, and cover your body with water, dirt, mud or nonflammable fabrics (a wool blanket is more flame-resistant than a synthetic blanket). If you call 911, it's possible but unlikely that rescuers can get to you soon. It won't hurt to reach out.

Your biggest risk often comes from smoke inhalation, not from the flames themselves. It's critical that you have a supply of clean air. Use a cloth to act as a filter around your mouth, and remain calm.

Pet and Livestock Safety

It can take a lot of planning to ensure that your pets and livestock get the best chance possible to survive a wildfire. If you have barns or other structures for the animals, treat them as you would your home. In other words, take steps such as clearing the area around them of debris and combustible materials.

Livestock Tips



Have several evacuation options for the animals. Possible shelters include fairgrounds, equestrian centers, stockyards and friends' property.



Designate a cleared area in case you have no choice but to leave your livestock. Leave sufficient hay or food for three days in addition to water (power cuts may render automatic watering systems unusable).



Keep copies your animals' important records along with copies of your own records. Include registration papers, vaccination and medical records, photographs of the animals and your proof of ownership.



Create a disaster kit for the livestock. Include items such as food and water for three days, wire cutters, knife, shovel, water buckets, flashlights, hoof pick, leg wraps and first aid items.

Above all, evacuate your livestock as early as possible. Once you sense danger may be on the way, get out instead of waiting for officials to sound the alarm.

For pets such as cats and dogs, the preparations aren't as extensive as they are for livestock, but they're just as important. Many of the steps are the same.



Have alternative places for your pets to go if they can't evacuate with you
(like if you're not at home).



Put ID, rab

n each pet.



Have your neighbors' contact information.



If you must leave your pets at home, bring them inside. Never leave them outdoors. Put them in a room such as a bathroom, utility room or garage. These spaces have sufficient ventilation, no windows and won't be too much of a pain to clean afterward.

Safety After a Wildfire

Listen to officials about when it's OK to return after a wildfire. If you attempt to go home before the all clear, you could end up dealing with smoldering ash, live embers, hot pockets that could spur another fire and water that is unsafe to drink.

When you do return, you're likely at high risk for inhaling unsafe dust particles. Get the debris and land around you wet, and wear **NIOSH certified-respirator dust masks** such as the N95. Also, try to use social media or texting to communicate with loved ones. Phone systems may be overburdened, so reserve calls for emergencies.

Interestingly, you may be at increased risk of flooding in the five years after a wildfire because these fires seriously change conditions on the ground. Mudflows and flash flooding could become more frequent, especially if the land has lost vegetation that will take a while to regrow. In fact, you may need to evacuate your home again due to floods or mudslides in the days, weeks or **months** after you return home. Heed these orders, and take out a flood insurance plan to further safeguard your property.

If a Wildfire Affects Your Air Quality

In many cases, wildfires burning an hour away or even many hours' drive from where you live can affect you. In fact, they may compromise the air quality in your town so severely that officials alert you not to venture outside. Here's what you can do in such situations.



Keep all windows and doors closed.



Use a portable air cleaner to keep the air quality in your house as high as possible.

If you have pets, take special care with those who are elderly, pregnant or young. Keep your pets inside as much as possible until the air improves. Definitely don't force dogs to keep up if you're jogging or biking. They should go on short walks only for bathroom purposes. In addition, make fresh water plentiful for your pets.

Birds in particular are susceptible to airborne particles. Keep them inside, and monitor them.

Make It Your Aim to Evacuate

Evacuating as early as possible is your best bet for staying safe when wildfires rage around your home. To avoid lingering, set up plans early so that you, your loved ones and pets have multiple evacuation possibilities. Stay away from the area until authorities say it's fine to return, and be mindful of the potential risk of mudflows and floods.

Additional Resources



Firewise USA: Home prep for wildfires, home fire sprinklers and much more



Cal Fire: Wildfire prevention, debris burning safety and other issues that can benefit residents of California and other states



Landslide Hazards: Identifying potential debris flow risks before a wildfire even occurs



Firewise USA: Home prep for wildfires, home fire sprinklers and much more

Cal Fire: Wildfire prevention, debris burning safety and other issues that can benefit residents of California and other states



Leaving: Pre-evacuation checklist