

STEP SEVEN: CLEANING UP – AFTER A FIRE



If you are insured, contact your insurance company. Your policy may cover house cleaning by a fire restoration specialist. As you go through your possessions, keep ruined furniture, appliances, books, etc. for insurance purposes. You can put them outside or in a shed temporarily.

Keep or discard? Household items often take several cleanings to rid them of smoke odours, soot and stains, and some items may never come clean or lose their smell. It may save you a great deal of wasted effort to consult a fire restoration specialist to judge what is worth saving and what isn't.

CAUTIONS:

- Many cleaning materials are hazardous. When using them, wear rubber gloves and goggles, keep children and pets away, and keep the materials away from flames. Make sure you have proper ventilation.
- Do not mix ammonia with bleach or any other cleaning products.

If you are doing the cleaning yourself, here are some cleaning and salvage tips:

- **Smoke, odours and soot:** Smoke odours can last a long time. You will probably need to clean everything in the house several times. Try placing small saucers of vinegar, vanilla or activated charcoal around the house to absorb odours. Commercial products are also available at supermarkets. If you cannot remove the smoke odour, contact a professional (listed under "Fire & Water Damage Restoration" in the Yellow Pages).
- **Overall house cleaning:** Vacuum all surfaces with wet and dry vacuums. Change and clean all heating and air conditioning filters. Have the heating ducts cleaned by a professional furnace cleaning company (listed under Furnaces – Cleaning in the Yellow Pages). Seal off the room you are working in with plastic sheeting to keep soot from travelling throughout the home.
- **Walls and Wallpaper:**
 - **Painted walls:** To remove soot and smoke, mix 60-90 ml (4 to 6 tablespoons) of tri-sodium phosphate (available at paint stores), 250 ml (1 cup) of chlorine bleach or a disinfecting cleanser, and 4 litres (1 gallon) of water. Wash a small area at a time, working from the floor up. Rinse with clear water immediately. Leave ceilings until last. Do not repaint until ceilings are completely dry.
 - **Wallpapered walls:** Usually wallpaper is not salvageable. Check with your wallpaper dealer. If wallpaper is salvageable, heat and ventilate the room for several days to dry the plaster and paper. Use a commercial paste to repaste loose edges or sections. Washable wallpaper can be washed like a painted wall, but work quickly so you don't soak the paper. Clean from the bottom to the top to prevent streaking.
- **Furniture and wood:** Do not use chemicals on furniture. Clean off dirt. Remove drawers and let them dry thoroughly so they will not warp. Scrub wooden surfaces (furniture, kitchen cabinets, railings, etc) with a stiff brush and a wood cleaning solution. Dry thoroughly, but do not put furniture in the sun, since the wood will warp and twist out of shape.

If mould forms, wipe the wood with a cloth soaked in a mixture of boric acid and hot water (see package for amounts).

To remove water spots or film caused by smoke, rub with a cloth soaked in 125 ml (1/2 cup) of household ammonia and 125 ml (1/2 cup) of water. Wipe dry and polish with wax.

Get professional advice for cleaning antiques and fine reproductions (listed under Antique Repair & Restoration in the Yellow Pages).

- **Flooring:** When water gets underneath linoleum, it can cause odours and warp the wood subfloor. If water has seeped underneath, remove the linoleum. Ask your flooring dealer to suggest a solvent to loosen the linoleum cement without damaging the flooring. Let the floor dry thoroughly before replacing the linoleum.
 - To clean wood or linoleum floors, use a good quality floor cleanser. It may take four or five applications to remove soot. Then use a wax stripper and re-wax.
- **Rugs and carpets:** It's important to clean carpets and rugs as quickly and thoroughly as possible.
 - **Throw and area rugs:** Lay them flat and expose them to warm, dry air. A fan aimed at the rugs can help. Check carefully: even though the surface seems dry, any moisture remaining at the base of the tufts can quickly rot a rug. Clean by beating, sweeping or vacuuming. Then shampoo with a commercial rug shampoo.
 - **Wall-to-wall carpet:** use a wet/dry vacuum or water-extractor-type carpet-cleaning machine to remove water and dirt. If necessary, use a commercial dryer to remove moisture from beneath carpets. Then steam clean and shampoo, repeating as needed. A final rinse using a mixture of one part vinegar to two parts water in the cleaning machine will help to reduce odours.
- **Mattresses and Pillows:** Mattresses and pillows are usually not salvageable. If you must use a mattress temporarily, let it air in the sun and then cover it with plastic sheeting.
- **Clothing:** If clothes are stained from smoke, they will probably not come clean.
 - To remove smoke odours and soot from clothes that can be bleached, soak the clothes in a solution of 125 ml (1/2 cup) of household ammonia and 8 litres (2 gallons) of water. Rinse in a solution of vinegar and water. You may need to repeat several times.
 - Take wool, silk and rayon garments and draperies to a professional dry cleaner as soon as possible.
- **Refrigerators and freezers:** To remove odours from your refrigerator or freezer, wash the inside with a solution of baking soda and water, or use 250 ml (1 cup) of vinegar or household ammonia to 4 litres (1 gallon) water. When doing this make sure it is done in a well ventilated area. Place an open box of baking soda or a piece of charcoal in the refrigerator to absorb odour.

STEP SEVEN: CLEANING UP – AFTER A FIRE (CONTINUED)



CAUTION: When cleaning or discarding a refrigerator or freezer, be sure the doors or locks are removed or secured to prevent a child from being trapped inside.

- **Cooking utensils:** Wash pots, pans, flatware, etc. with soapy water, rinse and polish with a fine-powered cleanser. You can polish copper and brass with special polish, salt sprinkled on a piece of lemon, or salt sprinkled on a cloth saturated with vinegar.
- **Leather goods:** It is best to have leather goods professionally cleaned. Wipe suitcases, shoes and purses with a damp cloth, then with a dry cloth. Stuff purses and shoes with newspaper to retain their shape. Leave suitcases open. When leather goods are dry, clean with saddle soap.
- **Locks and hinges:** Locks, especially iron ones, should be taken apart, wiped with kerosene and oiled. If locks cannot be removed, squirt machine oil through a bolt opening or keyhole and work the knob to distribute the oil. Hinges should also be thoroughly cleaned and oiled.
- **Hazardous materials:** Dispose of hazardous materials such as solvents, garden chemicals and home cleaning products that have been soaked or that show signs of water damage. Contact your municipality or provincial ministry to find out how to dispose of hazardous materials properly. Wear rubber gloves, goggles and protective clothing when handling hazardous materials.