

What-to-do manual: Wildfires

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In a wildfire, what kills most people isn't the fire — it's the smoke. And smoke reaches entire cities hundreds of kilometers from the flames. Here's how to set up a clean air room in your home, which mask actually works, and how many meters of cleared space the standard calls for around your house.

Before the crisis

Smoke is the cause of death, not the flames

U.S. Fire Administration statistics are stark: in residential fires, **40% of victims die from smoke inhalation alone**, and another **46% die from smoke combined with burns**. Altogether, **91% of deaths involve smoke, burns, or both**. Anything that cuts down the smoke you breathe is what changes your odds the most.

Defensible space. CAL FIRE divides the land around a house into three zones with exact distances. It's the single most effective measure for a home to survive a wildfire:

Zone 0 — 0 to 1.5 meters (0 to 5 feet) from the house

Only **non-combustible** materials. No stacked firewood, dry potted plants, fiber doormats, plastic furniture, or vegetation touching the wall. This is the strip where a single ember decides whether the house survives.

Zone 1 — up to 9 meters (30 feet)

Remove dead grass and plants. Prune branches to within **3 meters** of chimneys and flues, and space tree crowns **3 meters apart** to break up fuel continuity.

Zone 2 — 9 to 30 meters (30 to 100 feet)

Grass cut to **10 cm or less**. Firewood is stacked with **3 meters clear all around, down to bare soil**.

Set up the clean room before smoke arrives. The EPA explains how: pick a room with few windows and doors, keep them closed, and run a portable air cleaner or your central system with a **MERV 13 or higher filter in recirculation mode**. Inside that room, no smoking, no cooking with gas or wood, no candles, and no aerosols — all of that dirties the air you're trying to clean.

If you can't buy an air cleaner

The EPA itself validates the DIY alternative: a **MERV 13 or higher filter taped to a box fan** works as a makeshift air cleaner. This isn't an internet remedy — it's in the EPA's own official guidance.

- Keep **NIOSH-approved N95 or P100 respirators** on hand for every adult, bought before fire season.
- Store documents, medication, and irreplaceable items in a box you can grab and go with in two minutes.
- Agree on and memorize **two evacuation routes** out of your neighborhood, in case one is blocked.
- Keep your vehicle's gas tank above half during fire season.
- Don't burn trash in yards or vacant lots, and don't throw lit objects into areas with vegetation — this is CENAPRED's explicit recommendation, because most wildfires are human-caused.

Source: USFA — U.S. Fire Administration (FEMA) — Statistics on causes of death in residential fires.
<https://apps.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/statistics/v12i7.pdf>

Source: CAL FIRE — Ready for Wildfire — Defensible space around the home. <https://www.readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire/defensible-space/>

Source: EPA — U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — Create a clean room to protect indoor air quality during a wildfire.
<https://www.epa.gov/emergencies-iaq/create-clean-room-protect-indoor-air-quality-during-wildfire>

Source: EPA — U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — Wildfires and air quality (EPA fact sheet, Spanish-language). https://espanol.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-06/Wildfires_One-Pager_%20Spanish.pdf
Source: CENAPRED — Mexico's National Center for Disaster Prevention — Wildfires: prevent them. <https://www.gob.mx/cenapred/articulos/incendios-forestales-evitalos>

During the crisis

If you're told to evacuate, evacuate. And if you see fire nearby, don't wait

The 2018 Camp Fire caused most of its destruction **in the first four hours**. When a fire moves that fast, waiting for the official order can mean waiting too long. If you see fire or heavy smoke approaching your community, leave.

Respiratory protection: what works and what doesn't.

- The CDC recommends a **NIOSH-approved N95 or P100 respirator**, well-fitted to your face. Facial hair breaks the seal, and without a seal there's no protection.
- **Cloth and surgical masks don't filter** the fine particles in smoke. They're useful for other things, not this.
- For children, the CDC notes they can be used starting at age 2 with careful attention to fit; for infants, protection means keeping them indoors with clean air.
- Before you're exposed, **check the air quality index** on your country's official site or at [airnow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov), and follow the authorities' instruction to stay indoors.

How to read the Air Quality Index (AQI). This is the number that decides whether you go outside today:

0 to 50 — Good

Minimal risk to the public.

51 to 100 — Moderate

Risk for unusually sensitive people.

101 to 150 — Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups

People with asthma, COPD, heart disease, pregnant people, children, and older adults should limit outdoor exertion.

151 to 200 — Unhealthy

The general public may begin to notice effects. Reduce outdoor activity.

201 to 300 — Very Unhealthy

Health alert for everyone. Use your clean room and go outside only when essential.

301 or higher — Hazardous

Health emergency alert for the entire population.

Source: CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.) — How to stay safe during a wildfire. <https://www.cdc.gov/wildfires/safety/how-to-safely-stay-safe-during-a-wildfire.html>
Source: AirNow — EPA and partner agencies — Air Quality Index (AQI) basics. <https://www.airnow.gov/aqi/aqi-basics/>
Source: CAL FIRE — Remembering the Camp Fire. <https://www.fire.ca.gov/our-impact/remembering-the-camp-fire>

After the crisis

- Don't go back until authorities say it's safe: there can be active hot spots, unstable trees, and cut utilities.
- Keep your clean room running: smoke can linger for days after the fire is out.
- Wear **an N95 and gloves** to clean up ash, and dampen it lightly so it doesn't become airborne.

- Don't run fans that pull outside air indoors while the air is still dirty.
- Photograph all the damage before cleaning up, and keep the receipts for what you spend — you'll need them for insurance and aid programs.
- If anyone in the household has asthma or lung disease and gets worse, see a doctor: smoke exposure has effects that can show up days later.

Source: EPA — U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — Create a clean room to protect indoor air quality during a wildfire.

<https://www.epa.gov/emergencies-iaq/create-clean-room-protect-indoor-air-quality-during-wildfire>

Source: CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.) — How to stay safe during a wildfire.

<https://www.cdc.gov/wildfires/safety/how-to-safely-stay-safe-during-a-wildfire.html>

Family plan

1. Two evacuation routes, not one

Fires cut off roads. Every adult in the household should be able to name both without looking at a map.

2. A meeting point outside the area

Far enough away that it won't fall inside the same evacuation perimeter.

3. The go-bag

Documents, medication, chargers, a change of clothes, and your N95s. Packed at the start of the season, not the night of the fire.

4. Who gets whom out

Older adults, people with reduced mobility, and pets each assigned to one specific person.

The alert may not come

In Lahaina, the official preliminary report documented failures in the alert system. Your plan can't depend on a siren sounding or a message arriving — it has to work even if no one warns you.

Source: USFA — U.S. Fire Administration (FEMA) — Preliminary after-action report on the 2023 Maui wildfire.

<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/blog/preliminary-after-action-report-2023-maui-wildfire/>

Food and water

The water number you need to memorize

The CDC sets it without ambiguity: **at least 1 gallon (3.8 liters) per person per day, for 3 days**. Ready.gov adds the nuances that save whoever heeds them: "**children, nursing mothers, and sick people may need more**", and "**with very high temperatures, water needs can double**". If someone in your home is pregnant, sick, or you live in a hot climate, that number is a floor, not a target.

How to store it so it works when you need it

The CDC calls for **approved food-grade containers** with a tight-fitting lid, made of a sturdy, unbreakable material —**never glass**— and with a narrow mouth for pouring. An explicit warning: **never use a container that has held toxic chemicals** such as bleach or pesticides. And what almost everyone forgets: **stored water should be replaced every 6 months**. To disinfect the container before filling it, use a teaspoon of unscented household bleach per liter of water, wait 30 seconds, and pour it out.

What food to keep on hand

Ready.gov recommends **several days of non-perishable food** and gives a concrete list: ready-to-eat canned meats, fruits, and vegetables **—and a can opener—**, protein or fruit bars, dry cereal or granola, peanut butter, dried fruit, canned juices, and pasteurized long-life milk. The rule when putting it together is simple: food your family will actually eat, that needs no cooking, and that you can rotate before it expires.

No power, the food clock is running: 4 hours and 48 hours

The official figures come from FoodSafety.gov, part of the USDA: **a refrigerator keeps food safe for up to 4 hours** if you do not open it, and **a full freezer holds for about 48 hours (24 if half full)**. The discard threshold: any perishable food —meat, poultry, fish, eggs, leftovers— that has been **at 4 °C (40 °F) or above for 2 hours or more must be thrown out**. A full freezer holds twice as long as a half-full one, so filling the empty space with bottles of water before a forecast storm is money saved. And the line every agency closes with: **"when in doubt, throw it out"**. Do not taste it to find out.

- Keep the refrigerator and freezer **closed**: every time you open one, you waste hours of stored cold.
- **Throw out any food that has touched floodwater**, even if the container looks intact. This is an explicit Ready.gov instruction.
- Keep a manual can opener. It is the item people forget most, and without it your pantry is useless.
- If you buy bottled water, keep it **sealed in its original container**, in a cool, dark place.

Source: CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.) — How to Create and Store an Emergency Water Supply.

<https://www.cdc.gov/water-emergency/about/how-to-create-and-store-an-emergency-water-supply.html>

Source: Ready.gov · FEMA (U.S.) — Water. <https://www.ready.gov/water>

Source: FoodSafety.gov · USDA and HHS (U.S.) — Food Safety During a Power Outage.

<https://www.foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/food-safety-during-power-outage>

Source: Ready.gov · FEMA (U.S.) — Food. <https://www.ready.gov/food>

Power and communications

The generator rule: 6 meters, no negotiating

The CPSC does not soften it: **"using a generator indoors CAN KILL YOU IN MINUTES"**, because **"generator exhaust contains carbon monoxide, a poison you cannot see or smell"**. The official distance, repeated by the CDC and CPSC: **only outdoors, more than 20 feet (6.1 meters) from any window, door, or vent**. The same goes for pressure washers, charcoal grills, and camp stoves. A battery-powered carbon monoxide detector is cheap and the only thing that warns you in time.

When the cell network is overloaded: text, do not call

The joint FCC and FEMA guide explains why: **"text messages may get through when your call does not"**, even if delivery is delayed when the network is congested. And it asks for something almost no one does: **"limit non-emergency calls"**, because every call takes up space that emergency communications need. Also save a contact under the name **"ICE"** (In Case of Emergency), the convention rescue personnel look for on someone else's phone.

How to stretch your battery

The same guide recommends **lowering screen brightness and turning off apps** to conserve charge. In an emergency your phone stops being entertainment and becomes your only line to the outside world: treat it like your water supply.

The battery-powered radio is still irreplaceable

The FCC and FEMA recommend **a battery-powered radio or a portable television** to follow emergency bulletins during power outages. It is the only channel that depends on neither your electricity nor the cell network.

The alerts you already have and did not know about

In the United States, **Wireless Emergency Alerts** are free messages that go straight to your phone for severe weather, AMBER alerts, and threats to safety in your area. Two things worth knowing: **you do not need to sign up —phones have supported them since 2012— and they are not affected by network congestion**, so they get through when calls no longer do. Find out what the equivalent system is in your country, and do not mute it.

- Have at least one light source that does not depend on the grid: a battery-powered or hand-crank flashlight, or a rechargeable lamp.
- Charge phones and backup batteries **before** the forecast event arrives, not after the power is already out.
- Keep a list of important phone numbers **on paper**: if your phone dies, your contacts die with it.
- Agree with your family that after an emergency **everyone texts the same contact** instead of calling each other.

Source: CPSC — Consumer Product Safety Commission (U.S.) — What to Know About Portable Generators and Carbon Monoxide.

https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/468-WhattoKnowGenerators_2022.pdf

Source: FCC and FEMA (U.S.) — Tips for Communicating During an Emergency.

https://www.fcc.gov/sites/default/files/fcc-fema_tips_for_communicating_during_an_emergency.pdf

Source: FEMA (U.S.) — Wireless Emergency Alerts (fact sheet). <https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/wea-fact-sheet.pdf>

Health and special needs

This is the section that decides who has a hard time and who has a dangerously hard time. An emergency does not suspend diabetes, high blood pressure, pregnancy, or dependence on an oxygen concentrator: **what gets cut off is access to the pharmacy, the clinic, and electricity**. Everything that follows needs to be prepared beforehand, because once the emergency hits, there is no more room.

1. Keep a reserve of your medications, and know which ones hold up

Ready.gov calls for **a several-day supply of prescription medications**. For those that need refrigeration, the CDC is blunt: **once the power has been out for a day or more, discard any medication that requires refrigeration**, unless its label says otherwise.

2. The insulin exception, worth knowing word for word

The FDA documents that insulin in the manufacturer's original vials or cartridges —opened or unopened— **can stay unrefrigerated between 15 and 30 °C (59 and 86 °F) for up to 28 days and still work**. It loses effectiveness at extreme temperatures, and the longer the exposure, the less effective it becomes. In an emergency **"you may still need to use insulin that was stored above 30 °C"** —that is better than not using it at all— but as soon as proper storage is available again, those vials **should be discarded and replaced**.

3. If someone depends on electric medical equipment, there is one step almost no one takes

Ready.gov says it explicitly: you can **ask your power company to put you on a priority list for service restoration**. That step is free, can be done on any ordinary day, and changes the order in which you get reconnected. Add a backup battery for an electric wheelchair and for any assistive device, and talk with your doctor about how to keep the equipment running during a power outage.

4. Keep a copy of medical information, not just the pills

A list of medications with dosages, allergies, diagnoses, doctors' contact information, and —for infants— the vaccination record. A prescription bottle cannot always be refilled at a pharmacy in another city; a written list can solve that.

Pregnancy and newborns

The CDC calls for **prenatal vitamins and other medications** in the kit, plus supplies in case delivery happens without being able to reach a hospital: clean towels, clean sharp scissors, a bulb syringe, gloves, two clean white shoelaces to tie the cord, clean sheets, sanitary pads, soap or alcohol, and garbage bags. For infants: diapers, wipes, ointment, bottles, and formula. One detail that matters: **ready-to-feed formula is the safest option in an emergency**, because it does not need to be mixed with water and comes in sterile, single-use containers.

Disability, reduced mobility, and older adults

Ready.gov stresses **planning accessible transportation in advance** for evacuating or getting around, and including a service or support animal with its food, water, and supplies. That plan should be worked out with specific, named neighbors, not left vague.

The blow that comes later: mental health

The CDC names the normal reactions after a disaster —**fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness, frustration, trouble sleeping, or nightmares**— and recommends taking care of your body, staying in touch with other people, and taking breaks from the news. In the United States and its territories, the **Disaster Distress Helpline is available 24 hours a day: 1-800-985-5990**, with service in Spanish. Asking for help here is not weakness: it is part of recovery, just like repairing the roof.

Source: Ready.gov · FEMA (U.S.) — People with Disabilities. <https://www.ready.gov/es/discapacidad>

Source: CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.) — What to Do to Protect Yourself During a Power Outage.

<https://www.cdc.gov/natural-disasters/response/what-to-do-protect-yourself-during-a-power-outage.html>

Source: FDA — U.S. Food and Drug Administration — Information Regarding Insulin Storage and Switching Between Products in an Emergency.

<https://www.fda.gov/drugs/emergency-preparedness-drugs/information-regarding-insulin-storage-and-switching-between-products-emergency>

Source: CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.) — Emergency Kit Checklist: Pregnant Women, Infants, and Children.

<https://www.cdc.gov/children-and-school-preparedness/resources/emergency-kit-checklist-pregnant-women-infants-and-children.html>

Source: CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.) — Coping With Disaster or Traumatic Event.

https://www.cdc.gov/natural-disasters/media/pdfs/2024/08/coping_with_disaster_2_english.pdf

Home and belongings

Photograph before you throw anything away. It is the rule that recovers the most money

The official insurance instruction is literal: **"photograph and video the interior and exterior of your property, taken before you throw anything away"**. After that, you need to **report the loss to your insurer right away**, and **keep receipts, statements, and contractor invoices**, which is what ensures your claim payment arrives on time. Cleaning up before documenting is, in practice, giving up your claim.

1. Before you go back in: look, smell, and listen from outside

The CDC lays it out this way: **if you smell gas or suspect a leak, shut off the main valve, open all the windows, and get out immediately**. If there is standing water inside and you can cut the power from a dry spot, do it. And one simple warning that prevents explosions and fires: **use battery-powered flashlights, not candles, gas lanterns, or torches**.

2. Ventilate before you settle in

The CDC recommends going in briefly to open doors and windows, and **letting the house air out for at least 30 minutes** before staying inside.

3. Shutting off utilities: when to do it, and the mistake you cannot make

Gas has a rule with no exceptions: if you shut it off for any reason, **only a qualified professional can turn it back on. Never turn it back on yourself.** **Electricity** is shut off by switching off the individual circuits first and the main breaker last—the order matters, because an electrical spark can ignite gas if there is a leak—. **Water** should be shut off if pipes may have cracked, because that contaminates the house supply, and should not be turned back on until authorities confirm it is safe to drink.

4. Go back only when authorities say it is safe

It sounds obvious, and it is the instruction people break most often: **go back home only when authorities say it is safe.** Structural damage is not always visible from the street.

- Make a photo inventory of what is in each room today: it takes twenty minutes and is worth its weight in gold for a claim.
- Keep that inventory and your policies **outside the house**—in the cloud or with a family member—because a file that gets soaked along with the house is useless.
- If you have to leave, take your documents with you, not your furniture.
- Do not sign anything with a contractor while you are in shock: check the money section for the warning signs of fraud.

Source: FEMA · NFIP (U.S.) — Starting Your Recovery (National Flood Insurance Program fact sheet).

https://agents.floodsmart.gov/sites/default/files/media/document/2025-07/fema-nfip-starting-your-recovery_fact-sheet-10-2021.pdf

Source: CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.) — Safety Guide for Reentering a Flooded Home.

<https://cdc.gov/floods/safety/reentering-your-flooded-home-safety.html>

Source: Hawaii Department of Human Services (U.S.) — Utility Shutoff and Safety (official emergency preparedness guide).

<https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/communications/are-you-ready/utility/>

Money and income

Cash in small bills: the detail people discover too late

Ready.gov recommends it for a concrete reason: **"it is important to keep small bills on hand because ATMs and credit cards may not work during a disaster"**, right when you need to buy supplies, fuel, or food. No power means no card reader, and without a card reader a large bill is useless if no one has change.

The documents you need to protect today

The official recommendation is to keep insurance policies, deeds, property records, and other important papers **in a safe place outside the house**. FEMA publishes the **Emergency Financial First Aid Kit** for this, organized into four sections: household identification, financial and legal documentation, medical information, and contacts. Its rule for paper: **a fireproof and waterproof box or safe**, a bank safe-deposit box, or in the hands of someone you trust. For digital files: **password-protected files** on an external drive or in secure storage outside the home. And if you pay everything online, print your account records periodically.

An emergency fund, even a small one

The CFPB avoids magic formulas: **"the amount you need depends on your situation"**, but **"even a small amount can provide some financial security"**. Its underlying argument is the one that matters: without that cushion, a single unexpected expense **can grow far larger than the original bill through interest and fees**, because it forces you to rely on credit.

After the disaster come the people who rob you with paperwork

The CFPB describes the exact pattern: **"be wary of contractors who go door to door and of people who offer unsolicited 'opportunities' or use high-pressure tactics to force you to decide on the spot"**. Its concrete rules: **never pay by wire transfer, gift card, cryptocurrency, or cash**, because that makes it harder to get your money back; **do not make the final payment until the work is finished to your satisfaction**; and always ask **"can you show me your ID and your contractor's license?"** and **"can you give me three recent references from this area?"**. One fact that cuts off many scams at the root: **no FEMA worker or federal or state official ever asks for or accepts money**. Scammers pose as government employees, insurance adjusters, police officers, or bank employees.

Source: Ready.gov · FEMA (U.S.) — Financial Preparedness. <https://www.ready.gov/financial-preparedness>

Source: FEMA · Operation Hope (U.S.) — Emergency Financial First Aid Kit (EFFAK).

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_effak-toolkit.pdf

Source: CFPB — Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (U.S.) — How to Avoid Scams and Fraud After a Disaster.

<https://www.consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb/how-do-i-avoid-scams-and-fraud-after-a-disaster-en-1529/>

What you can sell

In a wildfire, demand arrives in three waves: **clean air** while smoke covers the area, **cleanup** once people can return, and **prevention** ahead of the next season, which is the most neglected of the three.

- **N-95 masks** and air purifiers or filters for indoor spaces while the smoke lasts.
- **Temporary sealing of windows and gaps** to reduce smoke coming into homes and businesses.
- **Ash and soot cleanup** on roofs, patios, cisterns, and HVAC systems.
- **Washing and recovery of textiles** soaked in smoke smell.
- **Creating defensible space**: clearing brush, trimming, and removing flammable material around the home.
- **Removal of burned trees** at risk of falling.

Raising prices because people are desperate can be illegal

When a state of emergency is declared, many countries limit by law how much the price of basic goods can rise. In **California**, the limit is **10% above the pre-emergency price** for 30 days —and **180 days for repair and cleanup services**—, with penalties of up to one year in jail and a \$10,000 fine. **Texas** does not set a fixed percentage but penalizes "exorbitant" pricing with fines of up to \$20,000 per violation. In **Mexico**, the Ley Federal de Protección al Consumidor (Federal Consumer Protection Law) requires sellers to honor the price offered and any maximum prices set by authorities, and PROFECO can impose fines. In **Brazil**, the Código de Defesa do Consumidor (Consumer Defense Code) prohibits "raising a price without just cause." Charging a fair price for hard work is legitimate; taking advantage of desperation is not.

Source: ILO — International Labour Organization — Labour Overview of Latin America and the Caribbean 2025 (executive summary).

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Executive%20Summary_Labour%20Overview%202025_LAC_ILO.pdf

Source: PROFECO — Federal Consumer Protection Agency (Mexico) — Ley Federal de Protección al Consumidor (Federal Consumer Protection Law), articles 7, 8, and 128. https://www.profeco.gob.mx/juridico/pdf/Ley_fed_protec_consum.pdf

Source: California Attorney General (USA) — Price gouging during declared emergencies. <https://oag.ca.gov/consumers/pricegougingduringdisasters>

Source: Presidency of the Republic (Brazil) — Código de Defesa do Consumidor (Consumer Defense Code), art. 39, X (raising prices without just cause). https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/l8078compilado.htm

Businesses and self-employment

It helps to start with one figure to size up what we're talking about: according to the ILO, informality **affects nearly half of the employed population of Latin America and the Caribbean, around 47%**, with huge differences between countries — under 30% in Uruguay and Chile, over 70% in Bolivia and Peru. For millions of families in the region, "looking for a job" and "starting something on your own" are the same sentence. What follows is not a promise of income: it is a map of what people actually do when a crisis hits, with the requirements and the risks laid out plainly.

Brush clearing and defensible space — the work that pays before the fire

It's the most sustainable business of this crisis because it sells **every year, fire or no fire**, and because insurers and local authorities often require it. Hand tools, a brush cutter, gloves, and eye protection. Offer it by season to whole neighborhoods in the wildland-urban interface: selling ten houses on the same street costs the same as selling one.

Indoor ash and soot cleanup

Fire ash isn't swept dry: it scatters and gets breathed in. You need a vacuum with the right filter, damp mopping, an N-95, and gloves. One detail that sets you apart from improvised competition: **cleaning the air-conditioning filters and ducts too**, where soot lingers for months.

Recovery of textiles and smoke-smelling belongings

A specialized laundering service — clothes, curtains, blankets, stuffed animals — solves something people value more than it seems, because these tend to be the belongings that actually survived. You can start with home washing machines and grow into home pickup.

Three jobs you should NOT improvise

Mold: the EPA sets the threshold at **10 square feet (about 3 ft × 3 ft)**; above that, or if the water came from sewage, it recommends hiring an experienced professional. Even below that threshold, you need an **N-95** respirator, long gloves, and non-vented goggles. **Chainsaw:** NIOSH is unequivocal that only a trained person should use one, and OSHA warns about kickback from the tip. **Electrical and gas lines:** OSHA instructs you to assume every downed line is energized, and NIOSH advises staying **10 feet (3 meters)** away from them. That work belongs to certified personnel, not on-the-job learning.

United States — SBA disaster loans

For areas with a declared disaster. The **Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL)** provides working capital for affected small businesses and nonprofit organizations; the **physical damage loan** covers losses not covered by insurance. Combined cap of **\$2 million**, interest **not exceeding 4%** if you cannot obtain credit elsewhere, terms of up to 30 years, and the first payment deferred 12 months. There is also a line for homeowners (up to \$500,000) and for renters for personal property (up to \$100,000).

Mexico — what actually exists today

FONDEN stopped taking on new commitments on January 1, 2021. What operates today in emergencies is **PAEAN**, run by Civil Protection, and it is worth knowing exactly what it is and is not: it delivers **relief supplies** — food kits, water, blankets, roofing sheets, cleaning materials — when a state's own capacity is overwhelmed. **It is not a reconstruction fund or a loan for your business.** For capital, look at state, municipal, or development-bank programs, always verifying on the official website: fraud schemes that use its name circulate around these programs.

Brazil — Pronampe for micro and small businesses

A credit line for **microenterprises** (annual revenue up to 360,000 reais) and **small businesses** (from 360,000 to 4.8 million). The amount can reach up to **60% of the previous year's gross revenue** for businesses with more than one year in operation, and up to 50% for new ones. The maximum rate is the SELIC rate plus up to 6% per year.

Source: EPA — Environmental Protection Agency (USA) — Mold Cleanup in Your Home (10-square-foot threshold).

<https://www.epa.gov/mold/mold-cleanup-your-home>

Source: OSHA — Occupational Safety and Health Administration (USA) — Keeping Workers Safe during Disaster Cleanup and Recovery (FS-3698).

https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OSHA_FS-3698.pdf

Source: NIOSH — National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (USA) — Hurricane and Flood Key Messages (Publication 2025-106).

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2025-106/pdfs/2025-106.pdf>

Source: SBA — Small Business Administration (USA) — Economic Injury Disaster Loans.

<https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/disaster-assistance/economic-injury-disaster-loans>

Source: SSPC — National Civil Protection Coordination (Mexico) — Guidelines for the Program for Emergency Response to Natural Hazards (PAEAN).

<https://sidof.segob.gob.mx/notas/docFuente/5626632>

Source: Federal Government (Brazil) — Novo Pronampe — credit for micro and small businesses.
<https://www.gov.br/memp/pt-br/programa-acredita/novo-desenrola-brasil/novo-pronampe>

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Two fires, and what they taught.

Camp Fire, California, November 8, 2018 — speed

In Butte County. CAL FIRE documents **85 civilian deaths**, more than **18,000 structures destroyed**, and **153,336 acres** burned. The towns of Paradise and Concow lost around **95% of their buildings**. **The lesson:** most of that destruction happened in the **first four hours**. Against a fire moving that fast, the window to get out is measured in minutes, not hours, and the moment to decide is when you see the smoke, not when the order arrives.

Lahaina, Maui, August 8, 2023 — the alert and the evacuation

More than **2,200 structures destroyed** and roughly **\$5.5 billion** in damage, according to USFA's preliminary report, which ranks it the **fifth-deadliest wildfire in U.S. history**. The death toll was revised several times: it dropped from 115 to 97 in September 2023 after DNA testing, and in June 2024 the Honolulu medical examiner and Maui police confirmed **102**. **The lesson:** early warning and evacuation routes matter as much as firefighting resources. A wind-driven urban fire isn't something you put out — you run from it.

Related guides on this site:

- Drought and extreme heat — the conditions that precede fire season.
- Health crisis — ventilation and respiratory protection.
- Power outage — preventive power shutoffs in high-risk areas.
- Combined crisis — wildfire followed by rain and mudslides.

Source: CAL FIRE — Remembering the Camp Fire. <https://www.fire.ca.gov/our-impact/remembering-the-camp-fire>

Source: USFA — U.S. Fire Administration (FEMA) — Preliminary after-action report on the 2023 Maui wildfire.
<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/blog/preliminary-after-action-report-2023-maui-wildfire/>

Frequently asked questions

How much space should be cleared around a house against wildfires?

CAL FIRE defines three zones: Zone 0, from 0 to 1.5 meters (0 to 5 feet) from the home, with only non-combustible materials; Zone 1, up to 9 meters (30 feet), with no dead grass or plants and tree crowns spaced 3 meters apart; and Zone 2, from 9 to 30 meters (30 to 100 feet), with grass cut to a maximum of 10 cm and firewood stacked with 3 meters clear all around.

What kind of mask protects against wildfire smoke?

The CDC recommends a NIOSH-approved N95 or P100 respirator, well-fitted to the face. Cloth and surgical masks don't filter the fine particles in smoke. Children can use them starting at age 2 with careful attention to fit, and for infants the right protection is keeping them indoors with clean air.

How much water should you store per person for an emergency?

The CDC recommends at least 1 gallon (3.8 liters) per person per day for 3 days. Ready.gov warns that children, nursing mothers, and sick people may need more, and that with very high temperatures water needs can double. Stored water should be replaced every 6 months.

How long does food last in the refrigerator during a power outage?

According to FoodSafety.gov, part of the USDA, a refrigerator keeps food safe for up to 4 hours if it stays closed, and a full freezer for about 48 hours (24 hours if half full). Any perishable food that has been at 4 °C or above for 2 hours or more should be discarded. The official rule is: when in doubt, throw it out.

How far from the house should a portable generator be placed?

Only outdoors, more than 20 feet (6.1 meters) from any window, door, or vent, according to the CDC and CPSC. The CPSC warns that using a generator indoors can kill in minutes, because its exhaust contains carbon monoxide, a poison you cannot see or smell. The same rule applies to pressure washers, charcoal grills, and camp stoves.

Is it better to call or text during an emergency?

Text. The joint FCC and FEMA guide explains that text messages may get through when a call does not, even if there is a delay when the network is congested, and it asks people to limit non-emergency calls so they do not tie up the network that emergency services need.

Does insulin go bad if the power goes out?

Not right away. The FDA documents that insulin in the manufacturer's original vials or cartridges, opened or unopened, can stay unrefrigerated between 15 and 30 °C for up to 28 days and still work, though it loses effectiveness at extreme temperatures. In an emergency it is better to use it than to go without, but as soon as proper storage is available again, those vials should be discarded and replaced.

What should you do if someone at home depends on medical equipment that needs electricity?

Ready.gov recommends asking the power company to put your address on a priority list for service restoration, keeping a backup battery for electric wheelchairs and assistive devices, and talking with your doctor about how to keep the equipment running during a power outage. This is something to arrange beforehand, not during the emergency.

Can you start cleaning your house after a disaster?

Before you throw anything away or clean anything, you need to photograph and video the interior and exterior of the property and report the loss to your insurer right away, according to the official guide from FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program. You should also keep receipts, statements, and contractor invoices. Cleaning before documenting usually means losing the claim.

Can you turn the gas back on yourself?

No. The official emergency preparedness guide is explicit: if you shut off the gas for any reason, only a qualified professional can turn it back on. Also, when shutting off electricity, switch off the individual circuits first and the main breaker last, because an electrical spark can ignite gas if there is a leak.

Why should you keep cash on hand for an emergency?

Because ATMs and card readers depend on electricity and network access, and they tend to stop working right when you need to buy water, fuel, or food. Ready.gov recommends keeping a small amount of cash at home, in a safe place and in small bills, since change may not be available during an emergency.

How can you tell if a contractor offering to repair your house is a scam?

The CFPB flags as red flags going door to door, offering unsolicited opportunities, or pressuring you to decide on the spot. It recommends never paying by wire transfer, gift card, cryptocurrency, or cash, not making the final payment until the work is finished to your satisfaction, and asking for ID, a contractor's license, and three recent references from the area. Also, no FEMA worker or federal or state official ever asks for or accepts money.

How many people died in the 2023 Lahaina, Maui wildfire?

The number was revised several times. It dropped from 115 to 97 in September 2023 after DNA testing, and in June 2024 the Honolulu medical examiner and Maui police confirmed 102 deaths. USFA's preliminary report also documents more than 2,200 structures destroyed and roughly \$5.5 billion in damage.