



HEALTH NEWS

A Wildfire Preparedness Guide: Steps to Take Before, During, and After a Fire

The magnitude of California's fires are bringing to light the importance of preparedness at all levels—from homeowners, to communities, to cities, and states.

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Save



Khaled Fouad (L) and Mimi Laine (R) embrace as they inspect a family member's property that was destroyed by Eaton Fire in Altadena, Calif., on Jan. 9, 2025. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images



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By Emma Suttie, D.Ac, AP

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As wildfires tear through California, forcing evacuations and destroying homes, many homeowners have been left wondering if more could have been done to prevent such devastation. Public awareness of how homeowners and community members in disaster-prone areas can protect their homes is vital.

“Science and post-fire research demonstrate that there ARE things people can do to prepare that are effective in saving lives and property,” said Michele Steinberg, director of the Wildfire Division at the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

“So, the biggest mistake would be not to prepare at all and to leave safety to chance,” she told The Epoch Times in an email.

Though numerous factors contributed to the cause of the current fires—many out of the control of the general public—there are preventative measures that people can take to avoid personal catastrophes, such as the loss of a home.

While the devastating wildfires continue to rage, figuring out how to prepare can feel overwhelming. The following tips aim to provide a starting point and practical guidance to help you prepare and stay safe.

Before a Wildfire

Before a wildfire strikes, understanding how to create a defensible space around your house is essential.

Prepare Your Home

Studies show that embers and small flames are the primary reason homes catch on fire, according to the National Fire Protection Association ([NFPA](#)). Embers—burning fragments of wood or vegetation carried by the wind—can travel over a mile and spark spot fires, igniting homes, debris, and flammable objects.

One of the most effective ways to protect your home from wildfires is to create a safe perimeter around it, clearing it of debris like mulch, dead leaves, pine needles, and other plant material that may be flammable. The NFPA calls this protective area the [home ignition zone](#), which extends 200 feet outward from your home and is divided into three regions.

The first 5 feet from your home are the most vital to protect, Erik Litzenberg, senior wildland fire advisor for the International Association of Fire Chiefs, said, reiterating that embers are the most significant threat to homes.

“It’s not like the movie version, where this giant wall of flames is blowing through a community, incinerating everything in sight. Really, the risk is embers,” he told The Epoch Times.

He added that if embers have a place to land and there is something flammable nearby, your house is at risk.

People can “harden their homes” or make them more resistant to embers by sealing eaves, not allowing attics to have open vents, and treating any wood castings where embers could land and start a fire, he said.

These precautions give you and your home the best chance of surviving a wildland fire, Litzenberg said.

Steinberg added that wildfire can only spread if it has three ingredients—heat, oxygen, and fuel.

Buildings, including our homes, are considered fuel sources for fire unless properly modified, and fire spreads rapidly from one fuel source to another, especially under strong winds, she said.

“Structures that are burning throw off lots of radiant heat for hours and hours and can ignite nearby structures that way, or by the burning material that breaks off in the wind and is carried into the neighborhood. If homes don’t ignite, they can’t burn—that’s why it’s so important for people to prepare their homes to resist ignition,” Steinberg added.

Additional Protective Measures

Here are some additional ways to protect your home and yourself:

- Whenever possible, use fire-resistant materials when building or repairing, especially if you live in a wildfire-prone area.
- When [landscaping](#), consider using rocks, stone, concrete, pavers, or gravel, particularly for areas closest to your home, as they are non-combustible and can act as fire barriers.
- Ensure you have an [outside water source](#) with a hose that is long enough to reach every part of your property.
- Choose a room in your home that can be sealed off from outside air. Have an air filter in the room for when there is a fire so you can close the windows and doors and have clean air to breathe in smoky conditions.

In aerial images of neighborhoods devastated by fire, it’s common to see intact live trees or green vegetation scattered among the destroyed homes or bordering the areas of destruction. “This shows us that fire has moved from the main wildfire by embers and flames into the neighborhood and has started consuming combustible buildings,” Steinberg said.

Make an Evacuation Plan

Have a clear evacuation plan. Ensure everyone in your household knows what to do and where to go if you need to evacuate. Practice the plan with pets before an emergency to stay calm when the time comes.

Since you may not be at home during a wildfire, have evacuation plans for work, your children's school, or anywhere else you spend a significant amount of time. Ensure everyone is aware of designated routes and safe places to go.

Collect Important Documents

Ensure you have copies of all your important documents like identification, health insurance, property deeds, and insurance policies. Ensure the documents are current, scanned, backed up digitally, and stored securely with password protection.

You can also seal hard copies in zip-lock bags to carry with you. Consider giving trusted friends or family members copies (digital or hard) as a backup in case you lose access. If you own a safe, include copies of important documents you may need after the fire.

Gather Supplies

Pack essential supplies in a [bug-out bag](#) in your home, including N95 masks for smoke inhalation, a first aid kit, [food](#) and [water](#) (for people and pets) for at least 72 hours, a few day's worth of clothing, and other emergency gear.

Keep a bug-out bag in your car in case you're not at home when the emergency strikes. Use a backpack if you need to travel on foot.

Rotate the contents of your bug-out bag seasonally to ensure you have the right gear for the appropriate season and to check for damaged or expired items. Remember to include comfortable walking shoes and thick socks to protect your feet if you need to walk long distances.

If you or anyone in your household has a medical condition, stock up on medications and any supplies they may need if you are cut off or need to evacuate for days or weeks.

Resource Management

Not everyone may be able to afford to stock up and have extra supplies on hand. One way to gather emergency supplies on a budget is to add a few additional items during your weekly grocery shopping.

Buying extra food, water, and emergency and first aid items will enable you to handle emergencies more effectively. Having supplies will ensure you're more self-reliant and able to handle problems like minor injuries when paramedics, firefighters, and law enforcement are likely overwhelmed.

Ready.gov warns to use caution when carrying flammable or combustible items such as aerosols, cooking oils, hand sanitizer, or rubbing alcohol. They also advise keeping electronic devices like cell phones charged and having backup chargers if you need to evacuate to keep up to date on current conditions in your area.

Always keep your car's gas tank as close to full as possible in case of emergencies so you can travel if needed. If a wildfire is coming your way and you must evacuate, you want to get as far as possible without stopping to refill your tank. Park your vehicle facing out for quick exits.

During a Wildfire

Knowing how to stay safe during a wildfire is crucial for your survival and the safety of your loved ones.

Stay Informed

Make sure you are up to date on the situation in your area. Many apps

and websites can help you prepare and stay informed when wildfires are close. Explore multiple ways to receive alerts. Some options include:

- [Emergency Alert System](#)
- [Wireless Emergency Alert](#)
- [FEMA app](#)
- [National Weather Service–Forestry Fire Danger Maps](#)
- [National Weather Service–NOAA Weather Radio](#)

Sign up for local community alerts and remain attentive to [air quality](#) notifications.

Know Your Evacuation Zone

Follow local fire and law enforcement on apps or social media to keep updated about if and when you need to evacuate and where to go. They will offer the latest recommendations based on the specific threat in your area and the appropriate safety precautions.

If you are asked to evacuate, do so immediately. You can download the [Red Cross Emergency app](#) for a list of open [Red Cross Shelters](#) in your area so you know where to go.

Use N95 masks to protect yourself from smoke inhalation during a fire, and go to a room in your home that can be closed off from outside air if you don't have to evacuate. Close all windows and doors and turn on the air filter to limit smoke inhalation. If your air conditioning system has a fresh air intake, switch it to "recirculate," so you're not pulling smoke into your home.

If you are trapped and in danger, call 911 and give them your location. Be aware that in a large-scale emergency like a wildfire, response

teams may be delayed in getting to you, or it may not be possible depending on the fire's size and severity.

After the Fire

Wait until local authorities say it is safe to return home. Also, verify that your [water is safe](#) to drink.

The ground around your home may still be very hot and contain embers that could start new fires. Use caution, wear protective clothing and shoes while working outside, and, if possible, wet any outdoor areas that are hot or smoldering to reduce the risk of new fires.

Keep pets and other animals away from hot areas so they don't get burned.

Given that phone lines are likely overwhelmed, experts advise using text messages and social media to connect with friends and loved ones and only making calls in emergencies.

Photograph any damage to your home or property, and make an inventory list for your insurance company.

Final Notes

Ultimately, Litzenberg says that the answer to the wildland fire problem is communities working together—rather than expecting single homeowners to prepare alone.

“People don't have to think they're starting from scratch. The research is already done. Best practices are already developed,” Litzenberg added. “Just get people together, find one of these already existing programs, and start doing it—that's the way to make your community safer.”

Wildfire Resources

- [Firewise USA—National Fire Protection Association \(FPA\)](#)
- [RSG! \(Ready, Set, Go!\) Program](#)
- [Wildfires—Ready.gov](#)
- [Wildfire Information Sheet—Ready.gov](#)
- [Fire and Smoke Map—Aairnow.gov](#)
- [EPA Smoke-Ready Toolbox for Wildfires](#)
- [Smokey Bear](#)
- [Preparing Homes for Wildfire—National Fire Protection Association \(NFPA\)](#)
- [Wildfire Risk Reduction Safety Tips—National Fire Protection Association \(NFPA\)](#)
- [Wildfires—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)



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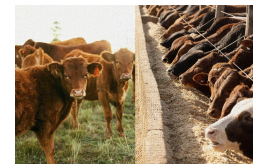
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Emma is an acupuncture physician and has written extensively about health for multiple publications over the past decade. She is now a health reporter for The Epoch Times, covering Eastern medicine, nutrition, trauma, and lifestyle medicine.

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