

# After a fire



# What to do in the hours and days after fire strikes

If you have been given this booklet, it's most likely that your home has been damaged or destroyed by fire. The advice in this booklet can help you through the days and weeks ahead.

While what has happened may be difficult to accept, there are things you can do right now to begin rebuilding your life and home.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Q: How did the fire start?

Depending on the type and size of fire, the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) Officer in Charge may be able to determine the cause. If they cannot the QFES Fire Investigation Unit (FIU) will attend the incident to investigate.

### Q: When can I go back into my home?

Before allowing you back inside, QFES will conduct atmospheric monitoring to make sure the home is safe to enter without breathing protection. If QFES FIU and/or Queensland Police Service (QPS) are conducting investigations to find the cause, there may be a delay before you can return.

### Q: Can I remove any items from my home?

Investigations by QFES / QPS need to be completed before any items can be removed from the property. Approval may be given to remove items from non-fire affected areas.

### Q: Can I live in my home?

If the fire was a substantial size, the structural integrity of the building may need to be checked by a qualified tradesperson before anyone can live in the building. If the fire was a smaller size, atmospheric monitoring and cause investigations need to be completed before you can live in the building.

### Q: Why have ceilings been removed and/or holes cut in walls?

In most cases, these actions are done by firefighters to make sure the fire has been completely put out.

# Contact Information

Use this page to list details relevant to the fire, contacts and phone numbers and the actions you may want to take.

Date and time of incident:

Police Officer's name:

Police Station:

Phone Number:

Date:

Fire and Rescue Service Officer's name:

Fire Station:

Phone Number:

Date:

Insurance Company:

Type of Policy:

Insurance Assessor:

Other Information:

**Lifeline** provides a confidential crisis counselling service and referrals.

Telephone: 13 11 14

For emergency pet care, contact the **RSPCA** on 07 3426 9999.

This is a 24 hour state-wide service.



## STEP 1

# Secure your property

After emergency services personnel have finished their work, the property will be handed back to you. You may need to protect the site from further damage by weather, theft, or vandalism.

The owner of a building or structure is responsible for making sure that external openings are secure and unapproved access to the site is restricted. You should also take precautions against further damage to your belongings as any damage after the fire itself may not be covered by insurance. You can use plywood sheeting to board up entry points, tarps to cover holes in the roof, or install temporary fencing to keep people off the property.

In rented properties, the occupant is responsible for informing the estate agent or landlord of the fire, who is responsible for securing the site.

You can get help with site security by contacting:

- a general building contractor
- a fire damage restoration company, or
- your insurance company.



## Safety

## STEP 2

Fires can restart from hidden, smouldering remains. Do not enter a fire damaged building unless necessary.

Utilities such as water, electricity, and gas supply may have been shut off or disconnected by firefighters.

### Electricity and Gas Supply

If you are unsure if something is safe, ask a relevant licenced tradesperson for advice. Wiring and appliances (gas or electric) must be inspected by a licenced tradesperson before the appliance is reconnected, or utilities restored to the site.

### Building Safety

Buildings affected by fire can easily become unsafe. Walls, roofs, and ceilings can give way without warning, and floors and stairs may not be as strong as they look. A building inspector will be needed to ensure structural safety before you re-enter the building. They are qualified to assess weaknesses in walls, ceilings and floors.

Be aware of hazardous waste such as asbestos (often found in bathrooms, laundries and cladding of older homes) which will require special handling and disposal. Visit [asbestos.qld.gov.au](http://asbestos.qld.gov.au) for more information.

## STEP 3

If you have insurance, immediately notify your insurance provider of the fire. Ask about your policy coverage and how to make a claim.

Make a list of damaged personal property, detailing (if possible) the quantity, description, purchase price, purchase date, and replacement cost. Take photos as proof. Do not throw away any item without first consulting your insurance company.

Contact your insurance company before hiring any cleaners, tradespersons or services. If you hire services without the insurance company's knowledge or consent, you may have to pay bills that otherwise would have been covered by your insurance.

Keep any receipts for money you do spend in relation to recovering from the fire, such as food, clothing and temporary accommodation. These expenses may be covered under your insurance.

If your insurance policy recently lapsed or you only just took out insurance, you may still be covered. You should get legal advice about your situation as soon as possible. Visit [legallaid.qld.gov.au](http://legallaid.qld.gov.au) for more information.

- » *Only the person listed on the insurance agreement can initiate a claim through the insurance company.*
- » *If you do not have insurance, you will need to pay out of pocket for any repairs to your home or to purchase any replacement personal property.*
- » *If you are a renter, the landlords insurance will not cover your personal property. If you do not have contents insurance, you will need to pay for any replacement personal property and make alternate living arrangements.*

# Insurance

# Leaving your home

## STEP 4

You may need to leave your home if there is structural damage or it is now an unsafe environment.

Contact local police to advise that your property has been involved in a fire and that it will be vacant. Provide them with contact details. Contact gas, electricity, water, phone and internet providers to suspend or cancel your services.

### Accommodation

Temporary housing may be available through local community-based organisations, however staying with family or friends can be the easiest option until more long-term arrangements can be made.

If you are insured, your insurance policy may include accommodation until repairs are made to your home. If you are a renter, your contents insurance may include coverage for temporary accommodation.

Consider your pets. You may need to make separate arrangements for their accommodation and health if you are unable to take them with you. They are likely to be very scared and anxious following the fire incident.





# Things to do

Check with the fire office-in-charge or police office (if present) before you enter the building. Make sure the area is safe to enter and follow all instructions. A structural engineer may be needed to give further advice.

There will be many things that you want to retrieve, however some items that are particularly important include:

- Identification - driver's licence, birth certificates, and passports
- Bank cards and credit cards
- Legal and financial documents
- Insurance papers
- Medications and prescriptions
- Spectacles, hearing aids, prosthetic devices, personal aids
- Valuables and personal items (e.g. jewellery, photo albums, cash, laptops, mobile phones, computer hard drives)



If your home was significantly damaged or destroyed you will need to get new copies of your important documents. Contact the appropriate government departments and companies to replace these items. Scan the QR code for more information.

Consider notifying these people or agencies to let them know that you are okay, and provide new contact details:

- Your employer
- Your children's schools
- Post office (to hold or forward your mail)
- Internet and phone provider
- Utility providers (gas, electricity, water)
- Your bank
- Your local council
- The police (if the fire is under investigation)
- Insurance company
- Aged or community care services.



# STEP 5

## Rebuilding Your Life

Repairing or rebuilding your life will depend on the extent of damage caused by the fire.

### Consult with your insurance company

If you are insured, your insurance provider will be able to assist and provide advice on the next steps. You will only be able to repair or rebuild after your insurance company has made an assessment and processed your claim. They will send a representative to assess damage and determine how much money you are eligible to receive based on your insurance policy.

### If you are not insured

If you are not insured, you will need to pay out of pocket for any repairs or reconstruction. Contact a registered builder or building consultant to assess the damage to your home. Ask for a written damage report to help you get quotes for any repairs you need to make.

You can also try contacting community groups for assistance.

### Prepare to rebuild

Remove debris from the site. Fire debris can be a health hazard and should be removed quickly.



If you suspect there is asbestos on the property, you will need to hire a qualified tradesperson to safely remove and dispose of it. Asbestos can be found in kitchens, bathrooms, laundries, and roofing of homes built before 1990. Visit [www.asbestos.qld.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.qld.gov.au) for more information.

Check if you need plans drawn up to rebuild or repair your home. Depending on the extent of the damage, you may need to have plans prepared by a professional architect, engineer, or building contractor. Your plans may need to be approved by a structural engineer and your local government.

### Construction

Hire a qualified construction company or builder to first address any structural repairs before focusing on inspecting and repairing the electrical system and other utilities and the remaining areas of fire damage. Be aware that this work could include dealing with smoke and water damage.

If you are rebuilding your home, you will need to consider hiring a qualified construction company or builder to take on the project. You may choose to get quotes from multiple companies before making a decision. If you are insured, your insurance company may make recommendations about preferred construction companies and even standards for building.

It's important that your home is rebuilt to the current building codes in Queensland and is fitted with new smoke alarms. You may also consider building a home that is more resilient to natural disasters that could impact your area.

Repairing or rebuilding your home can be a very lengthy process and can take many months.

## STEP 6

# Salvage Hints

### Replacing your personal property

You, or your insurance assessor will need to decide if your personal property needs to be replaced or if it can be salvaged.

Depending on which parts of your home have been damaged by fire, you may need to start purchasing essential items such as clothing and toiletries from your own funds. If you are insured, keep receipts as you may be able to claim these expenses against your policy.

If you do not have insurance, you will need to make any new purchases out of your own funds. If your home was not completely destroyed, you may be able to salvage some items that are affected by the fire but intact.

If you are insured, your policy may include a payout to purchase new replacement items. However, if your home was not completely destroyed there may be many items that your insurance provider deems salvageable. You will only receive funds for the items that cannot be saved and it may be some time before you receive the funds.



You should only begin salvaging your property after you have consulted your insurance provider, if insured.

Start by opening windows to get the air moving and ventilate areas. You can use a fan to circulate air.

#### » **Clothing**

Smoke odour can sometimes be washed from clothing. Treat clothing as soon as possible, before it dries and the odours set in.

Soak clothing in a mixture of washing detergent or white vinegar (or a mixture of the two) and warm water. Leave overnight and rinse the clothing out. If the odour remains, repeat this process. Once the smell has lifted, run the clothing through a normal wash cycle.

#### » **Cooking utensils, pots, and pans**

Check all dishes, pots, pans, cutlery and kitchen equipment that might have been damaged or contaminated and dispose of any damaged items. Wash everything with hot soapy water, and rinse thoroughly.

#### » **Electrical appliances**

Don't use equipment, particularly electrical appliances, that have been exposed to water until they have been checked by a licenced electrician.



# Salvage Hints

## Salvage Hints

### » **Non-perishable food**

Wash cans and jars in detergent and water. If the labels come off, use a permanent marker to note what's inside. Do not use canned foods that have bulged, or are dented or rusted.

### » **Fridge and freezer food**

If your home freezer has stopped running, you can still save the frozen food. Keep the freezer closed, as it has enough insulation to keep food frozen for at least one day.

Move frozen food to a family or friends' freezer. Wrap the frozen food in newspapers and blankets, or use an esky.

To remove odour from your refrigerator or freezer, wash the inside with a solution of bicarbonate soda and water, or use one cup of vinegar to 4 litres of water. Absorb odour by placing a bowl of bicarbonate soda in an open container in the refrigerator or freezer.

### » **Locks and hinges**

Locks (especially iron locks) 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 be thoroughly cleaned and oiled.



### » **Flooring and rugs**

When water gets underneath linoleum, it can cause odours and warp the floorboards. If this happens, remove the entire sheet. If the linoleum is brittle, a heat lamp will soften it so it can be rolled up without breaking. If carefully removed, it can be re-cemented after the floor has completely dried.

Small blisters in linoleum can be punctured with a nail and re-cemented if you are careful. Dilute regular linoleum paste thin enough to go through a hand syringe and insert the adhesive through the nail hole. Weigh down the linoleum with bricks or boards. It is usually possible to cement loose tiles of any type. Wait until the floor is completely dry before beginning work.

Allow rugs and carpets to dry thoroughly. You can clean throw rugs by beating, sweeping or vacuuming, and then shampooing. Dry them as quickly as possible. Lay them flat, and expose them to a circulation of warm, dry air. Using a fan on the rugs will speed drying. Make sure they are completely dry. Moisture remaining at the base of the tufts can quickly rot a rug.

For information on cleaning and preserving carpets, call your carpet dealer or installer, or carpet cleaning professional.



# Salvage Hints

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### » **Walls**

To remove soot and smoke from walls and floors, wear rubber gloves, a dust mask, long sleeved shirt and pants. You can use hot soapy water or a mixture of sugar soap and water.

Walls can be washed down while wet. Wash a small area at a time, working from the ceiling down, immediately rinsing the area with a clean wet cloth until the water is clear. Do not repaint until the walls and ceilings are completely dry.

Wallpaper can also be repaired. Use a commercial paste to re-paste loose edges or sections. Contact your wallpaper installer for information on wallpaper cleaners. Washable wallpaper can be washed like an ordinary wall, but be careful not to soak the paper.

### » **Furniture**

Do not dry your furniture in the sun as wood can warp and twist out of shape. Clear off the dust, mud and dirt by scrubbing with a stiff brush and warm soapy water. You can also rub the wood surface with a 4/0 steel wool pad dipped in liquid polishing wax, wiping with a soft cloth and then buffing. Remove any drawers and let them dry thoroughly so they do not stick when you replace them.

Wet wood can decay and mould, so allow it to dry thoroughly. Open doors and windows for good ventilation and if necessary, turn on your heating or air conditioner. If mould forms, wipe the wood with a cloth soaked in a mixture of vinegar and hot water.

To remove white spots or film, rub the wood surface with a cloth soaked in a solution of ½ cup of vinegar and ½ cup of water. Wipe dry and polish with wax, or rub the surface with a cloth soaked in linseed oil.

### » **Mattresses and pillows**

Cleaning an innerspring mattress at home is very difficult. Your mattress may be able to be saved by a company that builds or repairs mattresses. If you must use your mattress temporarily, put it out into the sun to dry, then cover it with rubber or plastic sheeting before adding sheets. It is almost impossible to get a smoke smell out of foam and feather pillows.

### » **Leather**

Wipe leather goods with a damp cloth, then a dry cloth. Fill purses and shoes with newspapers to retain shape. Leave suitcases open. Dry wet leather goods away from heat and sun. When dry, clean with saddle soap. You can use steel wool or a suede brush on suede. Rinse leather and suede jackets in cold water and dry away from heat and sun.

### » **Books**

You may not be able to salvage all of your books, however you can try drying them out. Immediately put books in the freezer to stop mould from growing until you have time to dry them.

If a book is very wet, keep it closed and balance the book on its edge so that the water can drain out. Put wax paper between any pages that are glossy to prevent sticking.

If a book is partly wet, open it carefully and insert absorbent paper at approximately every 20 pages. As it starts to dry, stand the book on edge and open it a little in front of a fan. Once nearly dry, close the book and add a light weight on top until the book is dry.







## Fire Service Reports

### Administrative Access Scheme

The QFES Administrative Access Scheme allows members of the public to access certain information held by QFES without having to apply through a formal Information Privacy or Right to Information application process. There is still a cost involved with this process.

Examples of the types of information collected and held by QFES that may be released through the Administrative Access Scheme are:

- Operational reports relating to fire incidents
- Operational reports relating to motor vehicle incidents
- Fire Investigation Reports
- Scientific Reports

### How to make a request

You can submit an enquiry via email, post or telephone. An application form, supporting documentation, and payment will be required .

For further information, telephone 13 QGOV (13 7468) or send correspondence to:

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services  
Administrative Access Scheme  
GPO Box 1425  
BRISBANE QLD 4001

Email: [QFESadminaccess@qfes.qld.gov.au](mailto:QFESadminaccess@qfes.qld.gov.au)

## Your Wellbeing

Being involved in a house fire can be an overwhelming and traumatic experience that can have a serious emotional toll. You may start to experience depression, anxiety, sadness, anger, fatigue, nightmares and difficulty concentrating. If you find your normal routine does not return after a few weeks, seek help from a counsellor or your doctor.

Take care of yourself. Get plenty of rest and maintain your normal routine. Try to include exercise, work and relaxation into your daily schedule and avoid using alcohol, stimulants, and drugs to cope.

Most people will recover over time with the support of family and friends. But sometimes distressing events can be difficult to overcome and professional help may be useful.

After a traumatic event it is often easier to talk to someone who is not involved and is trained to listen. Consider finding professional help if you:

- Feel very distressed, frightened, irritable or jumpy a lot of the time.
- Are unable to carry out your normal roles at work, school or with your family.
- Feel hopeless, despairing and think you cannot go on.
- Are thinking of harming yourself or someone else.

### Where to seek help

**Your Doctor** may be able to arrange additional mental health treatment or support (Medicare Rebates are available for a range of mental health treatments).

**13 HEALTH** (13 43 25 84) for 24 hour assessment, referral, advice, hospital and community health centre contact details.

**Counsellor** through your workplace or can be arranged by your Doctor.

**Kids Help Line 1800 551 800** — Telephone and online counselling for young people aged 5 to 25.

**Lifeline 13 11 14** — 24 hour telephone Counselling service

**Black Dog Institute** — [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/)

**Beyond Blue** — [www.beyondblue.org.au/](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/)

**Phoenix Australia** — [www.phoenixaustralia.org/](http://www.phoenixaustralia.org/)





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