Homes that survived historic LA wildfires now face dangerous levels of toxic compounds

PBS

“DANGER: Lead Work Area” reads a sign on a front door of an Altadena home. “May damage fertility or the unborn child. Causes damage to the central nervous system.”

Block after block there are reminders that contaminants still linger.

House cleaners, hazardous waste workers and homeowners alike come and go wearing masks, respirators, gloves and hazmat suits as they wipe, vacuum and power-wash homes that weren’t burnt to ash.

It’s been a year of heartbreak and worry since the most destructive wildfires in the Los Angeles area’s history scorched neighborhoods and displaced tens of thousands of people. Two wind-whipped blazes that ignited on Jan. 7, 2025, killed at least 31 people and destroyed nearly 17,000 structures, including homes, schools, businesses and places of worship. Rebuilding will take years.

The disaster has brought another wave of trauma for people afraid of what still lurks inside their homes.

Indoor air quality after wildfires remains understudied, and scientists still don’t know the long-term health impacts of exposure to massive urban fires like last year’s in Los Angeles. But some chemicals released are known to be linked to heart disease and lung issues, and exposure to minerals like magnetite has been associated with Alzheimer’s disease.

Ash in the area is a toxic soup of incinerated cars, electronics, paints, furniture and every other kind of personal belonging. It can contain pesticides, asbestos, plastics, lead or other heavy metals.

Many with homes still standing are now living with the hazards left by the fires.

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Source: https://uphelp.org/homes-that-survived-historic-la-wildfires-now-face-dangerous-levels-of-toxic-compounds/ Date: September 15, 2026

People forced back into their Altadena homes

Nina and Billy Malone considered their home of 20 years a safe haven before smoke, ash and soot seeped inside, leaving behind harmful levels of lead even after professional cleaning. Recent testing found the toxin is still on the wooden floors of their living room and bedroom.

They were forced to move back home in August anyway, after insurance cut off their rental assistance.

Since then, Nina wakes up almost daily with a sore throat and headaches. Billy had to get an inhaler for his worsening wheezing and congestion. And their bedroom, Nina said, smells “like an ashtray has been sitting around for a long time.” She worries most about exposure to unregulated contaminants that insurance companies aren’t required to test.

“I don’t feel comfortable in the space,” said Nina, whose neighbors’ homes burned down across the street.

They’re not alone.

Data shows dangerous lead levels still in homes

According to a report released in November by the Eaton Fire Residents United, a volunteer group formed by residents, six out of 10 homes damaged from smoke from the Eaton Fire still have dangerous levels of cancer-causing asbestos, brain-damaging lead or both. That’s based on self-submitted data from 50 homeowners who have cleaned their homes, with 78% hiring professional cleaners.

Of the 50 homes, 63% have lead levels above the Environmental Protection Agency’s standard, according to the report. The average lead levels were almost 60 times higher than the EPA’s rule.

Even after fires were extinguished, volatile organic compounds from smoke, some known to cause cancer, lingered inside of people’s homes, according to a recent study. To mitigate these risks, residents returning home should ventilate and filter indoor air by opening windows or running high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) purifiers with charcoal filters.

Zoe Gonzalez Izquierdo said she can’t get her insurance company to pay for an adequate cleanup of her family’s Altadena home, which tested positive for dangerous levels of lead and other toxic compounds.

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“They can’t just send a company that’s not certified to just wipe things down so that then we can go back to a still contaminated home,” Gonzalez said, who has children ages 2 and 4.

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Experts believe the lead, which can linger in dust on floors and windowsills, comes from burned lead paint. The University of Southern California reported that more than 70% of homes within the Eaton Fire were built before 1979, when lead paint was common.

“For individuals that are pregnant, for young children, it’s particularly important that we do everything we can to eliminate exposure to lead,” said pediatrician Dr. Lisa Patel, executive director for the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health and a member of the climate group Science Moms.

The same goes for asbestos, she added, because there is no safe level of exposure.

‘We have to live in the scar’
People who lived in the Pacific Palisades, which was also scorched, face similar challenges.

Residents are at the mercy of their insurance companies, who decide on what they cover and how much. It’s a grueling, constant battle for many. The state’s insurer of last resort, known as the California Fair Access to Insurance Requirements Plan, has been scrutinized for years over its handling of fire damage claims.

Homeowners want state agencies to enforce a requirement that insurance companies return a property to pre-fire condition.

Julie Lawson won’t take any risks. Her family paid about $7,000 out of pocket to test the soil in their Altadena home, even though their insurance company had already agreed to pay to replace the grass in their front yard. They planned to test for contaminants again once they finished remediating the inside, the process of making a home contaminant-free after a fire. If insurance won’t cover it, they’ll pay for it themselves.

Even if their home is livable again, they still face other losses — including equity and the community they once had.

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“We have to live in the scar,” she said. “We’re all still really struggling.”

They will be living in a construction zone for years. “This isn’t over for us.”

Challenges and mental health toll
Annie Barbour with the nonprofit United Policyholders has been helping people navigate the challenges, which include insurance companies resisting to pay for contamination testing and industrial hygienists disagreeing on what to test for.

She sees the mental health toll it’s having on people — and as a survivor herself of the 2017 Tubbs Fire in Northern California, she understands it.

Many were at first joyful to see their houses still standing.

“But they’ve been in their own special kind of hell ever since,” Barbour said.

Now residents like the Malones are inspecting their belongings, one by one, fearing they may have absorbed toxins.

Boxes, bags and bins stuffed with clothes, chinaware and everything in between fill the couple’s car, basement, garage and home.

They have been painstakingly going through their things, assessing what they think can be adequately cleaned. In the process, Nina is cleaning cabinets, drawers, floors and still finding soot and ash. She wears gloves and a respirator, or sometimes just an N-95 mask.

Their insurance won’t pay to retest their home, Billy said, so they’re considering paying the $10,000 themselves. And if results show there’s still contamination, their insurance company told them they will only pay to clean up toxins that are federally regulated, like lead and asbestos.

“I don’t know how you fight that,” said Nina, who is considering therapy to cope with her anxiety. “How do you find that argument to compel an insurance company to pay for something to make yourself safe?”

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