

LA residents still battling toxic hazards a year after historic wildfires

SC Now

ALTADENA, Calif. — “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 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 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.

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. 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.

People forced back into homes

Nina and Billy Malone considered their home 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.

They had 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.

Data shows dangerous lead levels

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 what they cover and how much. 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.

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

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

Challenges and mental health toll

Annie Barbour with the nonprofit United Policyholders has been helping people navigate the challenges, and she sees the mental health toll it’s having.

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.

Residents like the Malones have been going through their things, assessing what they think can be adequately cleaned.

Their insurance won’t pay to retest their home, Billy Malone 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.

“How do you find that argument to compel an insurance company to pay for something to make yourself safe?” Nina Malone said.

AP staff writer Alex Veiga contributed to this report.