

How to Remove Smoke Smell from a Home

During times of severe drought, Texas is often plagued by wildland fires from far West Texas, to central Texas, to the High Plains, the Hill Country, and even East Texas. Many homes are completely destroyed, yet many additional homes suffer smoke damage. The odors from smoke can leave you

feeling nauseous or with headaches, as well as an overall sense of annoyance at the



constant smoke irritation. The smoke infiltrates homes, and the lingering odor persists due to tiny microscopic particles that cling to walls, furniture, floors, clothing, etc. inside your home. Removing the smell of smoke can be a difficult job involving time, effort, and money.

Burning scented candles and perfumed aerosols are often used to remove smoke odor from a house. These remedies most often only mask the odor temporarily. Ventilation can help to remove some of the smell, but it actually only dilutes the odor and does not remove the smell permanently. To remove the smell permanently, one must remove the source of the problem. The smoke particles must be removed by cleaning since smoke particles tend to get into the smallest cracks and areas. This means that you may be left with lingering odors even after cleaning your house from top to bottom. Removing all sources of odors is the only way to ensure the scent will not linger. You may need to rent an ozone generator or hire a professional to use an ozone generator to destroy the smoke molecules that are left behind and are causing the odor. The use of an ozone generator requires a temporary evacuation from the home, and the cost of rental can range in the low hundreds. If you elect to operate the machine yourself, be sure to follow the safety precautions that accompany the rental machine.

Other states have suffered from wildfires in the past. Emergency management professionals

encourage those in areas affected by fire to follow a few basic clean-up procedures. The following helpful tips come from the FEMA website (<http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=3836>):

- Wash, and scrub all exterior surfaces including walls, walks, drives, decks, windows, and deck screens, etc.
- Wash and disinfect all interior walls and hard surfaces with mild soap or other appropriate cleaning solutions or products, and rinse thoroughly. Don't forget inside cabinets, drawers, and closets.
- Launder or dry clean all clothing.
- Wash, dust, or otherwise clean all household items, including knick-knacks.
- Disinfect and deodorize all carpets, window coverings, upholstered furniture, and mattresses with steam or other appropriate equipment.
- Upholstery, fabric window treatments, etc. can be spray-treated with deodorizing products available at most supermarkets, but do not use odor-masking sprays.
- Have heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning units and all ductwork professionally cleaned to remove soot, ash, and smoke residue. Change filters when you first return to the premises and at least once a month for the first year.
- If aerial fire retardant or firefighting foam residue is present on the house and/or automobiles, use a mild detergent and brushes to scrub and dilute the dried residue and flush it from the surfaces; rinse with clean water. A follow-up with pressure washing may be beneficial but will not replace scrubbing to remove the residue.
- Ash and soot on the ground and vegetation in the vicinity will continue to generate smoke odors and airborne particles when disturbed by air

movement. Until the ash and soot are diluted and absorbed by the environment, indoor mechanical air filtration may help minimize the uncomfortable and potentially health-threatening impact of these pollutants.

Smoke odors can be quite stubborn. Depending upon how strong the smoke odors are, one or more of the following



methods of cleaning may prove helpful. Keep in mind, though, that if the smoke odor has permeated into your carpets, draperies, furnishings, etc., there may be little that can be done to eliminate the smoke odor unless these items are removed or replaced. The following cleaning tips are from:

<http://www.howtocleanstuff.net/how-to-clean-smoke-damage/>.

- **Vinegar.** White vinegar cuts through odors naturally. Try wiping down furniture, washable walls, floors, etc. with white vinegar. Also, try placing several bowls of vinegar around the room with the smoke damage, leaving them there for several days. If you can't stand the smell of vinegar, try mixing a bit of lavender oil into the bowls to help cut the odor of the vinegar.
- **Baking Soda.** Baking soda is another natural odor-absorber. Try sprinkling liberal amounts of baking soda over furniture, floors, etc. Leave a few bowls of baking soda around the room for several days to help absorb the odors.
- **Febreze.** Febreze, a popular odor-reducing product sold in many stores, uses a chemical compound called cyclodextrin, a sugar-like substance that absorbs odors. Spraying the area down with Febreze may help to reduce the smoke odor.

- **Activated Charcoal.** This product, often used as a detoxifying agent, is also a natural odor absorbent. Placing bowls of activated charcoal (powdered form) around your room may help to absorb the smoke odors.
- **Fresh Air.** In the warmer weather, leave your windows and doors open as much as possible. Fresh air will eventually dissipate the smell of smoke.
- **Ozone Generators.** There are products on the market known as ozone generators that may help in reducing or even eliminating smoke odor from your house. Remember, though, that these expensive products, while effective in reducing the odor, will not eliminate it completely if the odor has permeated the carpets, draperies, furnishings, etc.

Getting the smoke smell out of clothing can be difficult. Some suggest using 1 cup of vinegar in the wash cycle, along with the usual detergent. One wash may not remove the smoke odor, so check for smoke odor. If the odor is still present, wash again using the same process. Smell the items each time after they are washed. If they still smell like smoke, wash them until the odor is gone. If you dry them in a dryer when they smell like smoke, you may set the odor in the clothing. The Iowa State Extension gives tips on removing stains and odors from clothing in their publication, *Quick 'n Easy Stain Removal*. Information about smoke odor is on page 6 at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm858.pdf>.

For additional information on dealing with the aftermath of a fire, go to the following publications written by the University of Missouri Extension at <http://extension.missouri.edu/publications/displaypub.aspx?p=gh145> and the University of Florida Extension at: <http://disaster.ifas.ufl.edu/pdfs/chap13/d13-17.pdf>.