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Wildfire Safety, Preparedness, and Aftermath Response for AI/AN Youth

A wildfire is an unplanned fire that burns in a natural area such as a forest, grassland, or prairie.¹ Wildfires are often caused by humans or lightning and can happen anywhere at any time. The risk of wildfires increases with dry weather and high winds.

Wildfires can severely damage homes and cause injury or death to people and animals.² Since 2000, a yearly average of about 70,000 wildfires have burned an annual average of 7 million acres across the United States.³

This document covers how to remain safe when there is a wildfire watch, warning, or evacuation, and how to help your child respond. Knowing what to do before, during, and after a wildfire minimizes the risk of injury and increases your chance of survival.



When You Find Yourself in the Path of a Wildfire and Are Unable to Evacuate⁵

At your house, the workplace, or school: If you are unable to evacuate, put on clothing that covers your body completely and stay inside your house. It is best to be in an area away from outside walls. Make sure all doors are closed but leave the doors and windows unlocked in case you need to get out. Remember, it is hotter outside than it is inside.

Outside: If you are trapped by a wildfire outside, do your best to find an area clear of vegetation along the road. If possible, cover any exposed skin with a jacket or blanket.

In a vehicle: When a wildfire is approaching and you are in a vehicle, drive to the closest shelter. If you cannot make it to a shelter, park in an area where there is little to no vegetation, close your vehicle windows and vents, cover yourself with a blanket or jacket, and lie on the floor.

Important phrases to know:⁴

- A **Fire Weather Watch** is a notice that dangerous fire weather conditions are possible over the next 12 to 72 hours.
- A **Red Flag Warning** or **Fire Weather Warning** is a notice for when there is an increased risk of fire due to weather patterns.
- An **Evacuation Notice** means that a fire is nearby and it is important to leave the area.

Preparedness¹

- **Sign up for communications** to receive weather notices and warnings.
 - The Emergency Alert System (EAS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio also provide emergency alerts.
- **Make A Plan**
 - Decide with your family where you will take shelter when a fire occurs near your home.
 - At school, talk with your students about what to do in the event of a wildfire watch or warning, whether at home or at school.
 - Stay up to date on your school's plans for severe weather events.
- **Know the community's evacuation routes**, several ways to evacuate the area, and local shelters.
- **Practice your plan.** Make sure to practice your plan with everyone and even family pets if you are at home.
- **Put together an emergency kit** with food, water, a first aid kit, face masks, a flashlight, battery-powered radio, and blankets.
 - It is also helpful to have an emergency bag packed with toiletries, essential medicines, and a change of clothes if possible.
- **If you can help others** who are not as prepared, do so.

After a Wildfire¹

- Wait for authorities to notify you that it is safe to return home.
- Beware of ash! It can cause irritation in the eyes, nose, skin, and lungs. Wearing an N95 mask can help limit exposure to poor air quality.
- Contact family and loved ones to check in on them and let them know you are okay. Allow students to do the same if possible.
- Drive safely and stay alert. Debris can cause unsafe driving conditions and there may be missing street signs or broken traffic lights.
- Assess the damage after the threat has ended if it is safe to do so. Wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, an N95 mask, and sturdy shoes.
- Contact local authorities if you see power lines down. Stay out of damaged buildings.
- Help others if it is safe to do so. Contact emergency response workers for more serious help.

Trauma Responses in Youth Due to Wildfires:^{6,7}

- Fear of another wildfire
- Anxiety when reminded of the wildfire or seeing similar signs such as smoke, ash, hearing sirens, or seeing fire trucks, campfires, barbecues, and fireplaces
- Feelings of anxiousness or nervousness
 - Nightmares, school avoidance
- Change in behavior
 - Agitation, withdrawal, clinginess
- Difficulty concentrating or learning

Note: Reactions are likely to differ from individual to individual and by age or development level.

How to assist and support AI/AN youth^{7,8,9}

First, take care of yourself and your family to ensure your physical and emotional health and avoid burnout and secondary trauma.

- Acknowledge and normalize their feelings.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings and the events that occurred.
- Help them to identify positive coping skills.
- Emphasize their resiliency.
- If you are a teacher or caregiver, discuss strategies with parents and other caregivers. Youth will be impacted based on how their parents/caregivers cope.
- Establish daily routines to help the child have a sense of what to expect.
- Keep open communication with school staff to help monitor how your child is doing throughout the day and in different settings.
- Refer students in need of additional support to mental health professionals.
- Give truthful and accurate information about the fire and the challenges families face (this can be adjusted based on their developmental level).
- Provide additional activities to help limit media exposure surrounding the fire:
 - Promote creativity and expression of emotion through art, song, and dance
 - Facilitate an environment where students can join in games together (e.g., Navajo Shoe Game, Squaw Dice, Apache Toe Toss Stick)
 - Encourage or facilitate storytelling
- Model being calm and hopeful after a wildfire occurs.
- Continue to monitor students. It is not unusual for those who have experienced trauma to withdraw socially or participate in alcohol or drug misuse, especially for those with a history of trauma.
- Encourage social situations and activities to reduce isolation and foster community solidarity and healing.
- Emphasize a community approach to healing to protect and support children.

Note: Some tribal languages do not have a word for “disaster” and refer to disasters differently than non-Native cultures do. Some may feel that saying the word “disaster” may bring harm to their community. It is important to pay attention to how members of the local tribal community refer to disasters and other traumatic events and to use the same words and phrases they use.⁹



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