

Safely Re-Entering a Damaged Home

The Post-Disaster Recovery chapter puts re-entry safety first, "before" the claims process, since none of that matters if entering the structure itself causes an injury. This guide is the actual walkthrough: what to check outside first, the gas and electrical checks, the structural red flags that mean turn around, and the order to move through the house once it's safe to go in. For the insurance and claims process that comes after, see [Filing Claims After a Disaster](#).

Wait for official clearance first

Return only once local authorities have said it's safe to do so. After a significant event, especially an earthquake, trained inspectors may have posted an official placard on the building: **green** means inspected and safe to occupy without restriction, **yellow** means restricted or limited use only, **red** means no entry at all, full stop, regardless of how urgent it feels to get inside. If no placard is posted yet, that doesn't mean it's safe, it may just mean an inspector hasn't reached the property yet.

Before you go anywhere near the door: the exterior check

Walk around the outside of the property first. Damage visible from outside is often a sign of a bigger problem inside.

- Downed or damaged power lines. If you see one, don't step in any nearby puddle or standing water, stay well back, and report it to the power company rather than moving it yourself.
- The smell of gas, or a hissing or blowing sound. Don't investigate further, see the gas section below.
- Foundation cracks, walls that are out of plumb, a sagging roofline, or ground fissures.
- After a wildfire specifically: ash pits, charred trees, and hot embers, which can stay dangerously hot for days.

Don't enter if you see floodwaters, significant visible damage and debris, or if a structural inspector or contractor hasn't yet confirmed the building is sound.

Gas: leave immediately if you detect it

1. If you smell gas or hear a hissing or blowing sound, don't turn on lights, don't use a phone or anything electrical inside, and don't investigate the source.

2. Open a window if you can do so quickly and safely, then leave the property immediately.
3. Turn off the gas at the main valve from **outside** if you can do so safely; the exact shutoff steps are covered in Fire-Starting & Generator Safety.
4. Call the gas company or fire department only after you're a safe distance away.

Electrical hazards

If any wiring looks damaged, or anything electrical has been wet, turn off power at the main breaker or fuse box rather than risk it. Have a licensed electrician inspect the system before restoring power to a home that's had any water intrusion or visible wiring damage.

Structural red flags: turn around if you see these

Sign	Why it matters
Any indication of collapse or foundation movement	The structure may not be able to bear its own weight, let alone yours
Cracked chimney mortar	A fire and carbon monoxide hazard even if the rest of the home looks fine
Cracks in the roofline, structural beams, or foundation	Signs the building's load-bearing capacity has been compromised
"Stair-step" cracks in drywall, especially after an earthquake	A classic sign of structural shifting, not just cosmetic damage

Once it's genuinely safe to go in

- **Wear real PPE:** sturdy closed-toe boots, work gloves, and an N95 or better respirator.
- **Use a battery-powered flashlight, never a candle or open flame,** in case of an undetected gas leak.
- **Leave children with a relative or friend** for this first inspection; the site may genuinely be unsafe for them, and seeing the damage firsthand can be upsetting.

Move through the home in this rough order:

1. **Stairs and banisters:** test stability before putting your full weight on them.
2. **Windows and doors:** look for jamming or cracks radiating out from the corners, a sign of structural movement.

3. **Appliances:** check connections; anything that got wet needs to dry out completely before it's powered on.
4. **Attic:** check for smoke or fire damage, especially after a wildfire.
5. **Basement:** inspect for cracks that could indicate a structural problem, not just water damage.
6. Stay alert for objects that could fall from cabinets or shelving that shifted during the event.

Water, sewage, and mold

- Turn off the main water valve if any pipes are visibly damaged.
- Don't flush any toilet until you've confirmed the sewage line itself is intact; flushing into a broken line can back up into the house.
- Assume tap water is unsafe to drink until local authorities confirm otherwise, even if it looks clear; see Water Purification if you need to treat it yourself in the meantime.
- If a basement or crawlspace is flooded, pump it out gradually, roughly **one-third of the water per day**, rather than all at once. Removing floodwater too fast can let outside groundwater pressure push against an unsupported foundation and cause it to crack or collapse.
- Watch for a musty smell in the days after, an early sign of mold growth in wet drywall, carpet, or insulation.

TIP

Race the 24-48 hour window, not just watch for the smell afterward

Mold can start growing within 24 to 48 hours of anything getting wet, so the actual goal is getting materials fully dry inside that window, not waiting to notice a musty smell later. Run fans and a dehumidifier, open doors and windows if outdoor air is drier than inside, and keep going until indoor humidity is at or below 50%. It's only a guideline, not a guarantee either way, but it's the practical target worth aiming for while you're already in cleanup mode.

Document before you clean anything up

Take photos and video of every damaged area before repairs or cleanup begin, and separate debris into yard waste, building materials, and regular trash as you go. This is the exact evidence the claims process depends on; see Filing Claims After a Disaster for what happens next.

Sources

- American Red Cross, checking a home's structural elements and utilities after a disaster: Red Cross; Red Cross
- American Red Cross, checking a home after a fire: Red Cross
- FLASH (Federal Alliance for Safe Homes), how to inspect, clean up, and re-enter a home after a disaster (exterior check, utility shutoffs, structural red flags, room-by-room order, floodwater pump-out rate): FLASH
- CDC, safety guidelines after an earthquake: CDC
- Mold growth timeline (24-48 hours) and CDC/EPA drying and humidity guidance: Palm Build Restoration