

Bushfire aftermath - safety tips

Summary

- Check with your local emergency services that it is safe to return to your property after a bushfire.
 - Wear protective clothing before entering your property after a bushfire.
 - Where possible, try to avoid taking children onto fire-damaged properties. If you do, make sure they remain protected at all times.
 - Hazardous wastes, such as asbestos materials and burnt CCA-treated timber, need special care during handling and disposal.
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Protect your health and safety after a bushfire

Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards. These may include fallen or sharp objects, smouldering coals, damaged electrical wires, leaking gas and weakened walls.

When returning to your property, make sure you are aware of the dangers and take steps to protect your health and safety.

Hazardous materials after a bushfire

Hazardous materials that may be present after a bushfire include:

- **asbestos**
(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/asbestos-and-your-health>)
- ashes, especially from burnt treated timbers (such as **copper chrome arsenate** or '**CCA**'
(<https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/Your-environment/Household-building-and-renovation/Treated-timber/timber-treatments/copper-chrome-arsenate-treated-timber>)
)
- LPG gas cylinders
- medication

- **garden chemicals**
(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/Chemicals-in-the-home>)
- farm chemicals
- other general chemicals (for example, cleaning products)
- metal and other residues from burnt household appliances
- dust.

If you have a septic tank, remember it may have been weakened in the fire so do not drive or walk over it.

It is unsafe to spread ash around your property, particularly if asbestos materials were used in your home or other structures, or if CCA-treated timber was burnt. It is also unsafe to disturb the dust when walking around your property.

Use protective clothing to check your property after a bushfire

Make sure you wear protective clothing before entering your property:

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves.
- Wear disposable overalls, with long sleeves and trousers.
- Wear a P2 face mask (or N95/KN95).
- When leaving the property, dispose of gloves, coveralls and face masks into a garbage bag. Wash your hands after removing contaminated clothing and articles. Shoes should be cleaned before being worn again.

Heat-affected food after a bushfire

All foods that have been fire damaged or affected by heat

(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/food-safety-after-a-fire>)

should be discarded. This includes all perishable and non-perishable foods (such as cans or packaged foods).

Power outages

(<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/factsheets/power-outages-food-safety-after-a-power-failure>)

can also leave perishable foods that may have been refrigerated unsafe to eat.

Debris in water tanks after a bushfire

Bushfires produce large amounts of smoke and ash, and your **tank water**

(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/bushfires-and-water-tanks>)

could have become contaminated from debris and ash, or dead animals.

If you have an evaporative air conditioner which is supplied by tank water, do not use it if this water has been contaminated.

If the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not drink it or give it to animals.

Taking care of yourself after a bushfire

For safety reasons, try to limit the time spent at your property immediately after a bushfire. However, if you will be there for an extended period, remember to bring:

- bottled drinking water
- food – perishable food should be kept cool in an esky or cooler bag
- sunscreen
- a hat.

Returning to your property may be **stressful**

(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/stress>)

and exhausting. It is important that you look after yourself.

Injured wildlife after a bushfire

It is not recommended that you attempt to catch injured wildlife due to the risk of further injury to wildlife or to you.

Importantly, due to the risk of **Australian bat lyssavirus**

(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/Australian-bat-lyssavirus>)

never attempt to handle a bat.

If you find an injured native animal call the Victorian Government's Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action on Tel. **13 61 86**

for details of wildlife carers or **check their website for local wildlife shelters and carers.**

(<https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/injured-native-wildlife/help-for-injured-wildlife>)

Cleaning up your home after a bushfire

If your home has been damaged by fire or smells of smoke from bushfires, you should ventilate it by opening the house up to sunlight and fresh air to help remove the odour.

Wash indoor surfaces with mild soap or detergent and water. For persistent smoke and soot, wear rubber gloves and wash with 4 to 6 teaspoons of washing powder and one cup of household chlorine bleach added to 4 litres of water. Remember to always follow the safety directions on the bleach container.

Cooking utensils can be washed with detergent and hot water and polished with a suitable polishing agent to remove discolouration.

You should inspect your makeup and your medicine cabinet after a fire. Throw out anything that has signs of soot, smoke discolouration or fire extinguisher dust. Dangerous chemicals can be ingested or be absorbed through your skin if you keep contaminated items.

Air soft furnishings (upholstered furniture and bedding) outside in the sunshine and wind. Mattresses may be able to be cleaned by a specialist mattress repairer. It is almost impossible to get the smell of smoke out of feather pillows or foam.

Low levels of ash on household surfaces are unlikely to cause short or long-term health effects. If anyone in your household is experiencing any **health effects from the smoky conditions**

(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bushfiresmoke>)

and you are concerned, seek medical advice.

If you need to use a ladder, make sure it's in good working order and you can **use it safely**

(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/ladder-safety>)

. Ladder falls can be fatal.

Wash affected clothing after a bushfire

Wash affected clothing normally and air dry outside in the sunshine and wind. Persistent stains and smoke odour can sometimes be washed from clothing using 4 to 6 teaspoons of washing powder and one cup of household chlorine bleach added to 4 litres of water. After washing, rinse clothes with clean water and dry well.

Remember to wear gloves and follow the safety directions on the bleach container. Care should be taken as this mix will bleach clothes.

Clothes left on the clothes line should be rewashed. While wind may have removed some smoke odour, soot, particles and ash may have been deposited on them. Rewashing protects sensitive skin (for example, babies) from possible irritants.

Where to get help

- **Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health, Victorian Government**
(<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/bushfires-and-public-health>)
Tel. 1300 761 874
- **VicEmergency Hotline**
(<https://www.emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/>)
Tel. 1800 226 226

- **WorkSafe Victoria**
(<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/>)
Tel. 1800 136 089
 - **EPA Victoria**
(<https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/>)
Tel. 1300 372 842
 - Local council
 - Your GP (doctor)
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References

- **Bushfires and public health**
(<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/smoke-from-fires-and-public-health>)
, Department of Health, Victorian Government.
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Department
of Health

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Department of Health - Environmental Health Unit

(<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health>)

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