

Bushfire aftermath - hazards

Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures that are burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards in the remaining rubble, ash and debris. You should take precautions to protect your health before visiting your property to recover personal items or arrange clean-up activities. For safety reasons, don't take children or animals with you.

Hazardous household materials

Hazardous household materials that may be present after the fire include:

- Asbestos
- Toxic ash from burnt treated timbers – for example, copper chrome arsenate (CCA) from treated pine
- Medicines
- Garden chemicals
- Farm chemicals
- Other general chemicals such as cleaning products and pool chlorine
- Metal and other residue from burnt household appliances
- Ash and dusts.

Before entering your property

Health and safety issues to consider before you enter your property include:

- Electrical hazards may exist, such as downed 'live' powerlines. Don't enter your property until advised by the proper authorities that it is safe to do so (by officers from emergency services, utilities or local council).
- Buildings and other structures may be unstable to enter or walk over. Before attempting to recover items or start any clean-up works, seek advice from your council's building section to make sure the buildings on your property are safe to enter.
- Smouldering coals and other potentially hazardous materials may be hidden under debris. For example, if you think buildings on your property may contain asbestos cement sheeting, take extra care when handling building wastes.
- Contact WorkSafe Victoria for information about safe handling of building rubble, debris or ash as part of your employment.

Protective clothing

Make sure you wear protective clothing before entering your property.

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves to protect you from broken glass, sharp objects and smouldering coals.
- Wear protective overalls, with long sleeves and trousers. If convenient, wear disposable overalls and throw them out with the site waste after use.
- Any non-disposable clothing should be cleaned or laundered prior to reuse. Don't forget to clean your shoes too.
- Wear a facemask.

Facemasks

Points to consider include:

- Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine ash or dusts or any asbestos fibres that may remain so they are not very useful for protecting your lungs.
- Special masks called 'P1' or 'P2' should be worn to filter out fine particles, including asbestos fibres. These masks are available at most hardware stores. P2 masks filter out a slightly higher proportion of fine particles than P1 masks.

- Wearing a facemask can make it harder for you to breathe normally. Seek advice from your doctor before using a mask if you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition.
- Facemasks are much less effective if there is a poor seal around the face and mouth. Men with beards can have difficulty getting a good seal.

Handling wastes

Make sure you wear protective clothing and equipment before handling any debris, ash or other waste. Other health and safety suggestions for handling wastes include:

- Don't bury building wastes and debris on-site or in nearby gullies. Hazardous materials in the waste may contaminate surrounding land and water, and harm the environment and the community.
- Don't spread ash around your property, particularly if asbestos materials were used in your home or other structures, or if CCA-treated timber posts or structures were burnt.
- Keep the waste debris wet to minimise airborne dust and ash. Don't use high-pressure water sprays for this purpose, as this can stir up the dust and ash.
- Use special care when handling and disposing of wastes such as asbestos materials and burnt CCA-treated timber. Contact the Victorian Environment Protection Authority (EPA) for more information about transport and disposal of hazardous materials.

Asbestos hazards

Safety issues to consider include:

- Buildings built before 1988 may contain asbestos cement (AC) sheeting in walls, roofs, floor underlays, eaves, some flues or the backing of some vinyl floor tiles. When intact, these sheeting materials are generally not a risk to health. However, sheeting materials that are broken up, cut, drilled or ground can release asbestos fibres into the air.
- During a bushfire, the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is likely to be low. This is because the intense heat of a bushfire causes fibres to stick together in clumps.
- After a bushfire, fibres may become airborne when excavation and clean-up works disturb the asbestos clumps. If asbestos is likely to be present on your property, a licensed asbestos removalist should be engaged to do the clean-up work. The waste must be transported in an EPA-approved vehicle and taken to an EPA-approved landfill for disposal.
- If you are present during clean-up works, wear a P2 facemask.
- If asbestos-containing material on your site is not burnt and is limited to only a few AC sheets, wrap them securely in two layers of heavy-duty plastic. Small fragments should be double-bagged in two plastic bags. Take to a landfill approved by your local council or the Victorian EPA.

CCA-treated timber hazards

Copper chrome arsenate (CCA) is a preservative that protects timber from insects. CCA-treated timber has been widely used in pergolas, decking, cubby houses, cladding, posts, gates, fencing and landscaping. After a fire, the remaining ash or char contains up to 10 per cent (by weight) arsenic, copper and chromium. Safety issues to consider include:

- Keep children, pets and other animals away from these ash areas until clean-up is completed. Young children are more likely to put things in their mouths – eating only a few grams can be harmful. Animals may also lick or eat the salty ash residue, which will cause poisoning.
- Ash can be double-bagged, sealed and taken directly to your local landfill. Damaged timber can also be disposed of to landfill. Contact your council for advice on local requirements or the EPA for advice on the environmental effects of CCA-treated timber.

If exposed to smoke or hazardous debris

Contact your doctor for health advice if you or your family have been exposed to bushfire smoke or contact with materials left after a bushfire. The Environmental Health Unit of the Department of Human Services can provide general health information about asbestos, CCA or other chemicals. For information about exposure to hazardous materials as part of your employment, contact WorkSafe Victoria.

Where to get help

- Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health Victoria Tel. 1300 761 874
- Victorian Bushfire Information Line Tel. 1800 240 667 (TTY for the deaf - 1800 122 969)
- WorkSafe Victoria Tel. (03) 9641 1555 or 1800 136 089

- Victorian EPA Tel. (03) 9695 2722 or 1800 444 004
- Your local council
- Your doctor
- Licensed asbestos removalist

Things to remember

- Wear protective clothing before entering your property after bushfire.
- Children and animals should be kept off-site until the clean-up is finished.
- Hazardous wastes, such as asbestos materials and burnt CCA-treated timber, need special care during handling and disposal.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health and Department of Human Services - Emergency Management

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