

Bushfires and water tanks

If you live in a bushfire-affected area, you should be aware that your water source could become contaminated from debris, ash, fire retardants or dead animals. Also, you should not source water from a creek that has been affected by bushfire as the water may be contaminated.

Water drawn from deep bores or wells should continue to be safe to use. If an alternative drinking water supply is required, contact your local council for a list of water carting contractors.

How to prevent your water tank from being contaminated

The most effective way to prevent contamination of your water tank is to make sure it is properly sealed and that the down pipes to the tank are disconnected as soon as there is a bushfire risk. Do not reconnect them until the roof has been cleaned after the bushfire, either manually or after a flush of rain.

How to tell if your tank water is contaminated

Water testing is not necessary as contamination is usually obvious. If your water has changed in colour, smell or taste, then it should not be used for drinking or food preparation. Water that is not suitable for drinking can still be used on the garden.

Dead animals on your roof, in your gutters or in your tank should be removed using gloves and put in a plastic bag for disposal. Your tank water should be disinfected before re-using.

Disinfecting tank water

Water can be disinfected by bringing it to a rolling boil or by adding chlorine in the following amounts.

For every 1,000 litres of water in the tank, you can safely add either:

- Approximately 125ml or 125g of 4 per cent household bleach. Avoid using bleaches that contain detergents or other chemicals, such as perfumes
- Approximately 40ml or 40g of 12.5 per cent chlorine liquid swimming pool or dairy factory chlorine
- Approximately 8ml or 8g of 65 per cent granular 'swimming pool' chlorine.

After chlorinating, you should wait at least 24 hours before using the water to make sure that all the microorganisms have been destroyed.

When to resume using your rainwater tank for drinking

If the water in your tank has not been contaminated, the water should be safe to use. However, do not reconnect your down pipes until your roof has been cleaned.

Do not use the water for drinking if it looks, smells or tastes unusual. The water and tank should be disinfected prior to use. Alternatively, you can arrange for your tank to be professionally cleaned. Where cleaning involves entering a tank, consider employing a professional tank cleaner. Tanks are confined spaces and can be dangerous to work in. Refer to your local business directory for water tank cleaners.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local council's environmental health officer
- For a list of water carters, contact the Environmental Health section of your local council or consult your local business directory.
- Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health Victoria Tel. 1300 761 874

Things to remember

- If the water in your tank looks, tastes or smells unusual, assume it is contaminated.
- Water can be disinfected by bringing it to a rolling boil or by adding accurate amounts of chlorine.
- If your tank needs cleaning, it is recommended that you contact a specialist contractor, as working in a confined space is dangerous.
- Water that is not suitable to drink may be used to fight fires or water the garden.

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

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