
Bushfires and your private drinking water supply

Summary

- A bushfire affected area is where water-bombing activities have occurred, and fire retardants, ash or debris have fallen directly onto properties.
 - If you live in a bushfire affected area your private drinking water could be contaminated from debris, ash, dead animals, aerial fire retardants and water-bombing.
 - If the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not drink, use for food preparation, brushing teeth or give to animals (pets or livestock). Use bottled water for drinking.
 - There are things you can do to protect your private drinking water supply to ensure it is not affected by a bushfire event.
 - In non-bushfire affected areas, smoke tainted rainwater is unlikely to be a health concern. If you are concerned about the taste of your rainwater, use bottled water for drinking and continue to use your rainwater for other uses.
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Protect your private drinking water tank from contamination

Before a bushfire

Develop a Home Emergency Plan

Consider how to protect your private drinking water supply as part of your **Home Emergency Plan**. Talk to your family to make sure more than one person knows what to do and how to manage your private drinking water supply.

Protect your private drinking water supply from contamination

- Know your private drinking water supply including where your water comes from, for example rainwater or groundwater supply. Advice on how to manage your private drinking water supply is provided in **Your private drinking water supply**.
- Make sure your water tank is properly sealed and tank covers are fitted.
- Install first flush diverters, leaf stoppers on downpipes, and gutter guards.
- Disconnect the downpipes from your tank as soon as there is a fire risk to avoid windblown ash, debris, fire retardants or water from water-bombing, entering the tank and contaminating your drinking water.

After a bushfire

Prior to reconnecting your downpipes, hose off the roof catchment area or wait for a good flush of rain to prevent contaminants entering your tank. If you need to clean your roof manually, take care to prevent slips and falls. This can be done by a professional cleaner. You can find out more information through your local council.

What happens if my downpipes have not been disconnected prior to a fire?

If you suspect your tank water is contaminated, or the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not drink, use for food preparation, brushing teeth or give to animals (pets or livestock) as it may be affected by the following:

- fire retardants or water from water-bombing, which may have been used around your property. There is a potential that these may have entered your tank.
 - ash or debris on your roof catchment. Disconnect your downpipes prior to a rain event. This will help prevent further debris and ash entering your tank.
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Use bottled water for drinking.

Boiling water does not remove fire retardants or other chemicals from your water. Fire affected water in your tank can still be used for irrigation and firefighting purposes. Water testing is not necessary.

If your tank needs to be cleaned, get a professional tank cleaner. Never enter a tank. Tanks are confined spaces and are very dangerous; the risks include loss of consciousness, asphyxiation and death.

Once the tank has been professionally drained and cleaned, refill with water from a source known to be safe for drinking.

What if I live in a non-bushfire affected area and my rainwater tastes of smoke?

The smoke taint alone is unlikely to be a health concern. However, if you are concerned about the taste of your rainwater, use bottled water for drinking and continue to use your rainwater for other uses.

What do I do if there are dead animals in my drinking water system?

Wear gloves to remove dead animals from your roof, your gutters, or in your tank. Dispose of gloves after use and disinfect your tank water before re-using it. Never enter a tank.

Water can be disinfected by bringing the water to a rolling boil, or by using chlorine.

To boil water for drinking purposes: bring water to a rolling boil by heating water till a continuous and rapid stream of air/bubble is produced from the bottom of a pan or kettle. Kettles with automatic shut off switches are suitable. Caution should be taken to prevent scalding from boiled water. Allow to cool before use.

To disinfect your tank water using chlorine, use the following instructions.

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

- approximately 125 mL or 125 g of chlorine household bleach (4 per cent available chlorine), avoid bleaches that contain detergents or perfumes, or
- approximately 40 mL or 40 g of liquid pool chlorine (12.5 per cent available chlorine), or
- approximately 8 mL or 8 g of granular pool chlorine/calcium hypochlorite (65 per cent available chlorine).

Note: one teaspoon is approximately five grams.

After chlorinating, wait at least 24 hours before using the water to allow time for microorganisms to be destroyed.

More information

- For local water carters or tank cleaners, contact the environmental health section of your **local council**
- For further information on fire retardants refer to **EPA Victoria's Fire retardants and health publication 1721**
- For general information on fires in Victoria, contact the VicEmergency hotline on 1800 226 226 or visit the **VicEmergency website**
- For more information about private drinking water supplies, visit:
 - **Your Private Drinking Water Supply**
 - enHealth Council - **Guidance on use of rainwater tanks**

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

Department of Health and Human Services - Emergency Management

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