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## Bushfire aftermath - safety tips

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### 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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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
- ashes, especially from burnt treated timbers (such as copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA')
- LPG gas cylinders
- medication
- garden chemicals
- 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, including:

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves.
- Wear disposable overalls, with long sleeves and trousers.
- Wear a P2 face mask (P2 face masks are sometimes referred to as N95 masks).
- 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 should be discarded. This includes all perishable and non-perishable foods (such as cans or packaged foods). Power outages can also leave perishable foods that may

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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 could have become contaminated from debris and ash, or dead animals. 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 and exhausting. It is important that you look after yourself.

### **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 four to six teaspoons of washing powder and one cup of household chlorine bleach added to four 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.

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 seek medical advice.

### **Washing affected clothing after a bushfire**

Wash affected clothing normally and air dry outside in the sunshine and wind. Persistent stains and smoke odour can be sometimes washed from clothing using four to six teaspoons of washing powder and one cup of household chlorine bleach added to four 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 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 2777 or 1300 372 842
- Local council

- Your doctor

### Things to remember

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- 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.

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

Department of Health and Human Services - RHP&R - Health Protection - Environmental Health Unit

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