

Public Health Information

Water tanks in bushfire-affected areas

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Are all rain water tanks contaminated after a fire?

No. Water tanks are usually only contaminated after a fire when it rains for the first time, washing ash and debris from the roof into the tank. In fact, DHS research suggests that there is very little contamination of water in tanks after fires.

How do I know if my tank water is contaminated after a bushfire?

You can tell if your tank water is contaminated after fire if it looks or smells noticeably different to what it did before fire. If it looks and smells the same as it did before the fire, then check the taste. If it tastes the same as it did before the fire, it is unlikely to have been contaminated.

If it smells unusual, or is cloudy, has an unusual colour or contains particles, assume it is contaminated. You will need an alternative supply of water for drinking, cooking and teeth cleaning.

Testing the water is not recommended, as contamination is usually obvious based on the colour, smell and taste.

What can I do to my rainwater tank to reduce contamination from a bushfire?

The easiest and most effective way to prevent contamination of your water tank is to disconnect the tank from the roof until the roof has been cleaned.

If you have a first flush diverter between the roof and the tank this should prevent ash and other debris from entering your water tank when it rains.

Do I need to have my water tank cleaned?

If the water smells and looks the same as before the fires you do not need to treat your water or clean your water tank. You only need clean your tank if you think they water is contaminated.

How do I clean my water tank?

You can have specialist contractors clean your tank, or if it's safe, you can clean your tank yourself.

If your tank water is grossly polluted, it is recommended that you engage a specialist contractor, as working with cleaning agents in a confined space is potentially dangerous.

To clean the tank yourself, you must ensure it is adequately ventilated.

If debris or ash has fallen or washed into your tank simply flush out the dirty water and refill the tank with drinking water. This water should be safe; however, you can disinfect it with chlorine.

If dead animals are found on your roof or in your water tank, they should be removed using gloves and put in a plastic bag for disposal. You should then disinfect your tank water with chlorine.

How do I disinfect the water in my tank?

Diluted bleach or chlorine will treat the water for bacteria. It can be used to wash down the tank walls or you can add it to the water as a disinfectant.

For every 1000 litres of water in your tank you can safely add:

- 4% chlorine household bleach* (approx) 125 mL or 125 g
- 12.5% chlorine liquid swimming pool or dairy factory chlorine (approx) 40 mL or 40 g
- 65% granular "swimming pool" chlorine (approx) 8 mL or 8 g (note 1 tsp = approx 5 g)

* Note: Avoid household bleaches that contain detergents or other chemicals such as perfumes.

How can I get clean water for my tank?

Local councils in most areas can help organise for replacement water if you have lost your supply of drinking water as a result of bushfires. Check with your local council to see what services are available in your local area.

Many water carters will ask that water tanks have been cleaned before they re-fill them with drinking water. It's up to the property owner to make this judgement, if you are satisfied after reading this information sheet that your water is safe then you can have your tank refilled.

Grant Assistance

People whose homes have been damaged but not destroyed by the Victorian bushfires may receive a \$3,000 grant to pay for repairs, including for water tanks. Families can receive further information about these payments by calling the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund on 1800 180 213.

Further information

- Other sheets relating to bushfires and public health include:
 - "Advice for people with water tanks living in bushfire-affected areas"
 - "Hazards on Your Property after a Bushfire" and
 - "Bushfire Smoke and Your Health"They can be downloaded from:
http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmnt/index.htm - bushfires
- The brochure *Your Private Drinking Water Supply* provides information that can help you keep your supply of drinking water safe and healthy, including advice about how to disinfect with chlorine. It can be downloaded from:
<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/water/tanks.htm>
- General advice for water carters can be found at:
http://www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/downloads/water_transport_guidelines02.pdf
- For further health information about the quality of your rain water tank after a fire, contact the Environmental Health Unit, Department of Human Services on 1300 761 874
- For further advice on disposal of dead birds and other small animals, contact your local Council.