

# Public Health Information

## Air quality in bushfire-affected areas

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### What is the air quality like in my area?

Increased particle levels are associated with reduced visibility (the poorer the air quality, the less you can see). This can be used as a practical indicator of air quality.

For information on how to self-assess air quality based on visibility visit [www.epa.vic.gov.au/air/bushfires/default.asp#table1](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/air/bushfires/default.asp#table1) or ask for information at your community hub or recovery centre.

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) will monitor air quality in bushfire-affected areas. This will complement the work underway by CFA, WorkSafe Victoria and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD).

#### What if there are large amounts of dust in the air?

Commonly, particles in dust are coarse and do not pose a serious health threat to the general public. However, some people with pre-existing breathing related problems, such as asthma and emphysema, may experience difficulties.

People who are more vulnerable than others are:

- Infants, children and adolescents
- The elderly
- People with respiratory conditions, such as asthma, bronchitis and emphysema
- People with heart disease
- People with diabetes.

#### How can I protect myself from dust?

The best way to protect yourself is to minimise contact with dust by staying indoors with doors and windows closed. If you are asthmatic or have a respiratory condition and cannot settle your symptoms seek medical advice.

If you are particularly concerned a special P1 or P2 mask can help to filter out dust particles.

#### What about asbestos fibres?

From our knowledge of asbestos during a bushfire, there is no significant public health risk from exposure to asbestos provided appropriate clean-up is undertaken and dust is minimised.

Preliminary investigations by DEECD of some schools in bushfire-affected areas in February 2009 found that "all readings taken by DEECD are below the safe level of detection".



### **What about when I return to inspect my property?**

When inspecting fire-damaged properties people should take precautions to minimise the risk from any disturbance of the dust and ashes:

- Do not stir up dust or ashes
- Wear a personal protection kit, available from community hubs, relief and recovery centres
- Do NOT undertake property clean-up
- Do NOT take children to damaged or destroyed properties.

### **What if my house is ok, but I'm worried about asbestos in neighbouring properties?**

During clean-up there will be a managed process for removing and disposing of materials, including harmful materials like asbestos. The State and Federal Governments have announced clean-up arrangements and further information will soon be available.

### **What about air quality during clean-up?**

Where you choose attend clean-up works you need to be properly equipped to minimise exposure to dust and other harmful substances. Ensure children are NOT around demolition works.

WorkSafe Victoria will determine dust suppression and monitoring requirements in association with the clean-up.

The EPA will monitor air quality in affected areas and this information will be provided to the affected communities through your community hub or a relief or recovery centre in your area.

### **Further information**

This information has been jointly prepared by EPA Victoria and the Department of Human Services. Most community hubs and recovery centres provide access to the internet. If this is the case, fact sheets relating to bushfires and public health can be accessed from [http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency\\_mgmt/index.htm](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmt/index.htm) - bushfires

- For further health information about air quality and bushfires, contact the Environmental Health Unit, Department of Human Services on 1300 761 874 or visit [www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire).
- For more information about asthma and bushfire smoke see the Asthma Victoria website at [www.asthma.org.au](http://www.asthma.org.au).
- For information on fires in Victoria and general fire safety advice, please contact the **Victorian Bushfire Information Line (VBIL)** on freecall **1800 240 667**.
- Callers who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech / communication impairment may call textphone/ telewriter (TTY) on 1800 122 969.

