

# Public Health Information

## Cleaning up your property after a Bushfire

### Introduction

Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures that are burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards in the remaining rubble and ash.

Hazardous household materials that may be present after the fire include asbestos, ash from burnt treated timbers (i.e. copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA' timber), medicines, garden or farm chemicals, other general chemicals (e.g. cleaning products, pool chlorine etc.), metals and other residues from burnt household appliances as well as ash and dusts.

Before visiting your property (to recover personal items or arrange cleanup activities), consider the following precautions to protect your health. For safety reasons, access should be limited to adults.

### Before going on-site

- Electrical hazards may exist (such as "live" powerlines that may be down). Do not enter your property until you have been advised that it is safe (by officers from emergency services, utilities or local council).
- Buildings and other structures may be unstable to enter or walk on. Before attempting to recover items or start any cleanup works, seek advice from your Council Building Section to make sure it is safe.
- Be aware that hot, smouldering coals and other potentially hazardous materials may be hidden under the rubble. If you think buildings on your property may contain asbestos cement sheeting, take extra care when handling building wreckage.

### Protective clothing

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy duty work gloves to protect you from broken glass, standing on sharp objects or getting burnt by smouldering coals.
- Wear protective overalls (with long sleeves and trousers). If convenient, wear disposable coveralls and throw them out with the site waste after use. Any non-disposable clothing (including shoes) should be washed or cleaned before reuse.

### What about wearing a facemask?

- Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine ash or dusts or any asbestos fibres that may remain. They are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.
- Special facemasks (called 'P1' or 'P2') should be worn to filter out fine particles, including asbestos fibres. They are available at most hardware stores. 'P2' Masks filter out a slightly higher proportion of fine particles than 'P1'.
- Wearing a facemask can make it harder for you to breathe normally. If you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition, seek your doctor's advice before using one.
- You should note that these types of masks are much less effective if there is a poor seal around the face and mouth. Men with facial hair, especially beards, can have difficulty getting a good seal.

### Cleaning Up

- Make sure you wear protective clothing/equipment before handling any debris, ash or other waste

- Building rubble should not be buried on-site, or in nearby gullies, as hazardous materials in the waste may contaminate surrounding land, harming the environment and the community.
- Moisten the ash with water to minimise dust. Do not use high-pressure water sprays, as this can stir it up.
- Don't spread ash around your property, particularly if it might contain asbestos or CCA-treated timber.

### **Asbestos hazards – cleanup and disposal**

- Buildings built before 1988 may contain asbestos cement (or 'AC') sheeting in walls, roofs, floor underlays, eaves, chimney flues or in the backing of some vinyl floor tiles. These sheeting materials are not a health risk unless they are cut up, broken up or ground, when they may release asbestos fibres.
- During a bushfire, the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is likely to be low.
- After a bushfire, fibres may become airborne when excavation and cleanup works disturb the asbestos clumps. If a large amount of asbestos material (e.g. house or shed) requires demolition and removal, a licensed asbestos removalist should be engaged. The waste must be transported in an EPA-approved vehicle and taken to an EPA-approved landfill for disposal.
- If you are present during cleanup works wear a 'P2' facemask.
- If asbestos-containing material on your site is not burnt, and limited to only a few AC sheets, wrap it securely in two layers of heavy duty plastic (or double bagged in two plastic bags for small fragments) and take to a landfill, approved by Council or Victorian EPA.

### **Ash from burnt CCA-treated timber – cleanup and disposal**

- "CCA" stands for copper chrome arsenate, a preservative that protects the timber from insects. CCA-treated timber is commonly used in pergolas, decking, cubby houses, cladding, posts, gates, fencing and landscaping. After a fire, the remaining ash/char contains up to 10% (by weight) arsenic, copper and chromium.
- Young children are more likely to put things in their mouths. Swallowing only a few grams can be harmful. Animals may also be poisoned after licking or swallowing the salty ash residue. Children, pets and other animals must be kept away from these ash areas until cleanup is completed.
- Ash should be double-bagged, sealed and taken directly to your local landfill. Damaged timber can also be disposed to landfill. Contact your Council for advice on local requirements or EPA for further advice on the environmental effects of CCA-treated timber.

### **Further information**

- For health advice on exposure to bushfire smoke or contact with materials left after a bushfire, contact your doctor.
- For general health information about asbestos, CCA or other chemicals, contact the Environmental Health Unit of the Department of Human Services (DHS) on 1300 761 874.
- For information about transport and disposal of hazardous materials (eg. asbestos) contact the Victorian EPA (03) 9695 2722 or 1800 444 004 (toll free).
- For information about safe handling of building rubble or ash, as part of your employment, contact WorkSafe Victoria on 1800 136 089 (toll free).
- Other fact sheets relating to bushfires and public health include: "*Bushfire Smoke and Your Health*", and "*Advice for people with water tanks living in bushfire affected areas*". These fact sheets can be obtained from the Environmental Health Unit of DHS by calling 1300 761 874 or downloaded from [http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency\\_mgmnt/index.htm#bushfires](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmnt/index.htm#bushfires).

