



COMMUNITY INFORMATION

FIRE AT CHEMICAL WAREHOUSE, INDWE STREET, FOOTSCRAY

January 2008

This update is provided in response to community concerns about the fire.

WHAT HAPPENED?

On Saturday 22 December 2007, a fire occurred at Westpoint Pty Ltd, a chemical warehouse in Indwe Street, West Footscray.

The fire started early in the morning in chlorine-based water treatment chemicals (including sodium dichlor), stored in the warehouse. The Metropolitan Fire Brigade attended and controlled the fire by mid-afternoon.

During the incident, a misty, pale cloud was visible. EPA Victoria received a number of complaints of a strong, chlorine-like odour from people in the surrounding areas, mainly West Footscray and Footscray.

WHAT IS HAPPENING AT THE SITE AFTER THE FIRE?

MFB, Worksafe and EPA required the owners of the warehouse to have the premises cleaned up and made safe. The vast majority of chemicals have been moved off site.

A management plan is in place to ensure the safe storage and removal of waste chemicals. This plan has involved measures such as vapour monitoring, core temperature monitoring, material repackaging and segregation, and 24-hour surveillance of the site.

EPA is currently working with the company and waste service providers to identify the remaining wastes and dispose of them in the most environmentally responsible manner possible. EPA will inform the community when clean up is complete.

WHAT ADDITIONAL ACTION IS BEING TAKEN

The Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner will be coordinating with the relevant agencies to hold a meeting with residents in the near future.

There are also operational debriefs by all of the agencies involved and issues raised by residents are included as part of the debrief process.

EPA, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the Department of Human Services and Worksafe are all undertaking their own investigations into the fire.

Following is information related to:

- People
- Plants and Property
- Pets

PEOPLE

What is chlorine?

When chlorine-based chemicals are heated or burned, chlorine gas is created.

Chlorine is:

- A yellow-green gas with a sharp, irritating odour.
- Used widely in chemical manufacturing, bleaching, drinking water and swimming pool disinfecting, and in cleaning agents.
- Heavier than air so tends to settle in low-lying areas until it is dispersed by wind.
- Dissolves in water and does not persist in the environment.

What air monitoring was conducted during the fire? Metropolitan Fire Brigade

Air monitoring was conducted both in the general vicinity of the premises and various locations downwind from the site. The following table represents approximate peak chlorine concentrations. The peak readings refer to maximum chlorine concentrations recorded at the time of sampling.

Time of sampling	Location of sampling	Peak concentration (ppm)
0900 - 1000	Onsite - at source of the fire	35ppm
1100 - 1200	50m downwind of premises	1ppm
1100 - 1200	200m downwind of premises and beyond to West Footscray and Tottenham train stations and Williamstown Rd	Did not exceed 0.1ppm

EPA Victoria

At 10.30 am, EPA staff tested for chlorine levels in the air at the eastern end of Indwe Street. The levels were less than 1 ppm (part per million).

WHAT IMMEDIATE HEALTH EFFECTS CAN BE CAUSED BY EXPOSURE TO CHLORINE?

- Generally the more serious the exposure, the more severe the symptoms.
- Most exposures to chlorine occur by smelling or breathing in the gas.
- Chlorine can be smelled by most people at very low air levels (0.3 ppm).
- Air levels from 1 to 3 ppm may cause mild irritation to eyes, nose and throat which can be tolerated by most people for up to an hour.
- Air levels from 3 to 6 ppm, may result in itching and burning of the eyes, nose, and throat, as well as coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. However, once exposure has stopped, symptoms usually clear up quickly.
- Exposure to higher air levels will produce more serious effects. Breathing in large amounts of chlorine may cause the lining of the throat and lungs to swell, making breathing difficult.
- People who have experienced serious symptoms (up to several hours after exposure ceases) may need to be hospitalised.

ARE ANY FUTURE HEALTH EFFECTS LIKELY TO OCCUR FROM CHLORINE EXPOSURE?

If you smelled the chlorine without any symptoms of chlorine exposure, no health effects are expected after the fire.

If you experienced irritation to your eyes, nose or throat these effects should have resolved quickly after the fire was out. If these symptoms have not resolved, seek medical advice.

If you experienced respiratory irritation during the fire, it may take up to 2 weeks for your lung function to return to normal. Seek medical advice if you experience any ongoing respiratory symptoms.

Chlorine exposure is not associated with delayed or long-term health issues such as cancer or birth defects.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER EMISSIONS FROM THE FIRE?

Smoke from a fire contains a mixture of gases, liquid droplets and solid particles due to the decomposition and combustion products from what is burning. We are not sure exactly what else was in the fire, however it is likely that plastics, wood and other building materials were burnt.

Asbestos fibres:

The roof of the warehouse involved in this fire was made of corrugated asbestos sheeting.

With respect to asbestos, fire research indicates that:

- Although asbestos fibres can be released into the air when the roof heats up and the sheeting breaks, the number of fibres is relatively low (ie. less than the average background level in the general environment).
- This situation is considered to be typical of that which would be expected for all types of fires in buildings with substantial quantities of asbestos-cement materials.
- Therefore, hazardous conditions are not expected with respect to asbestos fibres either close or away from the fire.
- The main hazard is to workers on-site who are cleaning up after the fire.

I AM STILL CONCERNED ABOUT MY HEALTH AND THE HEALTH OF MY FAMILY. WHO SHOULD I TALK TO?

If anyone is experiencing health effects as a result of this fire they should seek medical advice. Take this sheet with you if you go to see your doctor.

Further information on the health effects of chlorine can be obtained from the Department of Human Services (DHS) Environmental Health Enquiry Line on 1300 761 874 during business hours.

PLANTS AND PROPERTY

Can chlorine affect my garden vegetation?

Yes, chlorine gas can affect plant growth and survival. How much damage depends on a range of factors, including the plant species, the level of chlorine in the air and length of time of the exposure.

The gas enters through the surface of the leaves. It directly affects the leaf's ability to capture light and moisture. When leaves cannot function, this affects the overall growth of the plant and its produce. Chlorine does not accumulate in the actual plant or its produce but the effect on the leaves does influence the ongoing viability of the plant.

Chlorine gas damage can start at very low levels in the air (0.1 to 0.2 ppm), just below those that may be smelled by most people. Soft leaved plants, such as vegetables and herbs are more sensitive to chlorine and suffer greater damage. More severe plant damage can occur at air levels up to 5 ppm.

Can I eat my garden vegetables, fruit or herbs?

As explained above, chlorine does not accumulate in the plant or its produce. Chlorine is very water-soluble therefore any chlorine-residue on garden fruit, herbs or vegetables can simply be washed off. Produce can be eaten as normal.

If you do not wish to eat the produce in your garden, chlorine-affected garden vegetation and produce can be composted.

How do I help my garden recover from any damage?

Depending on the degree of damage, some plants may die but others will recover. Ornamental plants will require pruning and fertilising.

I have a rainwater tank. Can I still water the garden with this water?

Just prior to the fire, there was a heavy rainfall and most tanks in the area should have been relatively full.

Any chlorine residue that may have landed on the roof would have reacted quickly with sunlight. If it rained just after the fire, and residue was washed into your tank, it is very unlikely this would affect the quality of your water.

Irrespective of the chlorine fire, it is not advisable to drink water from rainwater tanks, as the quality cannot be guaranteed. Drinking water from the mains supply is safe.

I've come back from my holidays and the house smells of chlorine. What should I do?

If your home smells of chlorine:

- Open the house up to sunlight and fresh air to help remove the odour.
- Air soft furnishings in the sunshine.
- Wipe indoor surfaces, water should be sufficient. If a white film is visible on surfaces, wash down with soap and water.
- Very low levels of chlorine on household surfaces are unlikely to cause short or long-term health effects.

What about clothes left on the clothes line?

If your clothes were on the clothes line on Saturday 22 December 2007, and you've just come back from holidays:

- Sunlight and rain should have removed any chlorine residue. However, as a precaution these clothes should be rewashed.
- Rewashing ensures protection of sensitive skin (eg. babies) from possible irritant effects.

I think the fire has damaged my property, what can I do?

Chlorine gas can affect the surface of some metals. As part of its on-going investigations into this discharge, EPA is seeking community members who experienced the effects of the fire to make a report. If you have already made a report or spoken with an EPA Officer, please do not feel obligated to call again.

While you can contact EPA to assist them with further investigations, any enquiries regarding insurance claims or compensation should be directed, in writing, to Westpoint Pty Ltd 57 Indwe St, Tottenham VIC 3012. Westpoint will pass all enquiries on to their insurance loss assessor.

PETS

I am concerned about my animals. What should I do?

If you have any concerns about the health of your pets take them to see a veterinary surgeon for further advice.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR ADVICE CONTACT

EPA Victoria

Contact the EPA West Metropolitan Region on **9695 2560** for further advice on:

- The environmental impacts of this fire.
- The cleanup activities at the site.
- The air monitoring carried out by EPA.

Department of Human Services – Environmental Health Unit

Contact the Environmental Health Enquiry Line on **1300 761 874** about:

- The health information contained in this sheet.

Your local doctor

If anyone in your household is experiencing any health effects seek medical advice.