

Public Health Information -

Advice for people with water tanks living in bushfire-affected areas

Introduction

Bushfires generate large amounts of smoke and ash. If you live in a bushfire-affected area you should be aware that your tank water could become contaminated from debris and ash or dead animals being flushed into your rainwater tank when it rains, or during fire-fighting activity.

Ash may make your drinking water unsafe; you will need to watch the quality of your tank water to determine if there are visual signs of change or any taste or odour problems. Obviously, any dead animals will contaminate the water and make it unsafe to drink. If you have any doubt about the quality of your water you should drink an alternate supply.

The presence of debris and ash on your roof indicates that the first flush of water after it rains will not be suitable for drinking.

Catchment areas

Similar issues apply to catchment areas following rain. Debris will wash into creeks and streams. Therefore water from creeks or streams will not be suitable for drinking. Untreated water from these sources should not be used for drinking in any event. Water from deep bores or wells should continue to be fit for human and animal consumption.

Water that is not suitable for drinking may still be used to water the garden or for fire-fighting purposes.

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.

You could install a first flush diverter between the roof and the tank to prevent ash and other debris flushing the water when it rains. These are available from most hardware stores and suppliers of rainwater tanks.

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

The best guide is your knowledge of what your tank water usually looks and tastes like.

- If the water tastes or smells unusual, or is cloudy, has an unusual colour or contains particles, assume it is contaminated. You should seek an alternative supply of water for drinking, cooking and teeth cleaning.
- If in doubt, assume the tank water is contaminated.
- Boiling the water will not remove contamination from ash and debris.
- Water that is not suitable to drink may still be used for other purposes, such as clothes washing, bathing, fire fighting or watering the garden.

When can I start using my rainwater tank again for drinking water purposes?

- If your area has been affected by a bushfire, you should clean the ash and debris from your roof and gutters only when it is safe to do so. Be careful to avoid injuring yourself. If it rains prior to cleaning, you should ensure that the first flush of rainwater is not collected in your tank by disconnecting the tank or using a first flush diverter.
- Dead birds or other small animals found in gutters should be removed using gloves and put in a plastic bag for disposal.
- If you wish to clean your tank, remove any sludge and rinse/scrub the interior with a diluted household bleach solution (according to the directions on the label). Do not climb inside the tank unless you can ensure you have good ventilation, as an enclosed space can quickly become a potential hazard.

Further information

- 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>
- Copies of this brochure are available from Department of Human Services regional offices, Councils, community centres and bushfire recovery centres.
- General advice for water carters can be found at:
http://www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/downloads/water_transport_guidelines02.pdf
- For further advice on disposal of dead birds and other small animals, contact your local Council.
- 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
- Other sheets relating to bushfires and public health include:
 - "Hazards on Your Property after a Bushfire" and
 - "Bushfire Smoke and Your Health"

and can be downloaded from:

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmt/index.htm - bushfires

or mailed to you by calling the Environmental Health Unit of Department of Human Services on 1300 761 874.