

The health and wellbeing of Victorian adults affected by the bushfires in 2009

Victorian Population Health Survey 2011–12

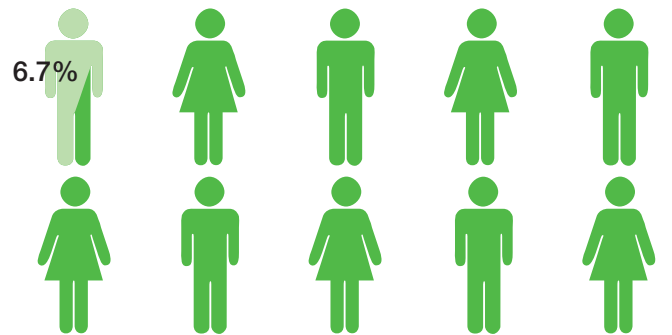
In late January and early February 2009, Victoria experienced one of its most significant periods of bushfire activity, culminating in the Black Saturday bushfires on 7 February, one of Australia's most significant natural disasters. Victoria experienced several days of extreme heat with temperatures in excess of 40 °C recorded in a number of areas. There were a number of deaths and many injuries and burns as a result of the bushfires. Many people lost their homes and livelihoods. There were losses to local infrastructure, and large tracts of bush and productive farmland were burnt.

In 2011–12, the Department of Health conducted the Victorian Population Health Survey, an annual survey that collects information on the health of adult Victorians, aged 18 years or more. The survey included questions about the impact of the bushfires that occurred in early 2009.

The findings from the survey are representative of all adult Victorians who were affected by the fires.

How many people were affected by the bushfires in 2009?

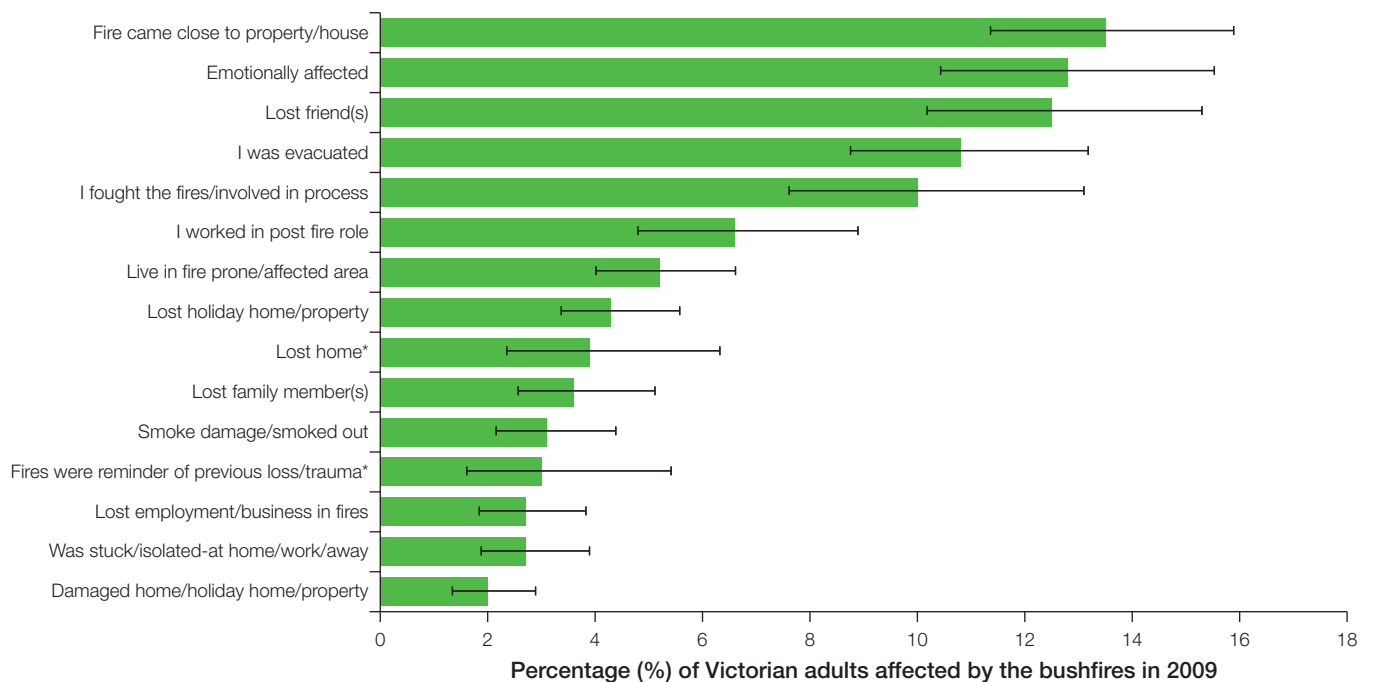
The survey showed that 6.7 per cent of adult Victorians (up to 320,000 adults) were affected by the bushfires in 2009. In 2011–12, Victorians who were affected by the fires were dispersed across the state, with a large number living in Melbourne.



Up to 320,000 adult Victorians were affected by the bushfires in 2009

How were people affected by the bushfires in 2009?

Adult Victorians were affected by the fires in a number of different ways



Note: Survey respondents were able to report multiple (more than one) effects from the fires.

Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Data are crude estimates; they were not age standardised.

* Estimate has a relative standard error of 25–50 per cent and should be interpreted with caution.

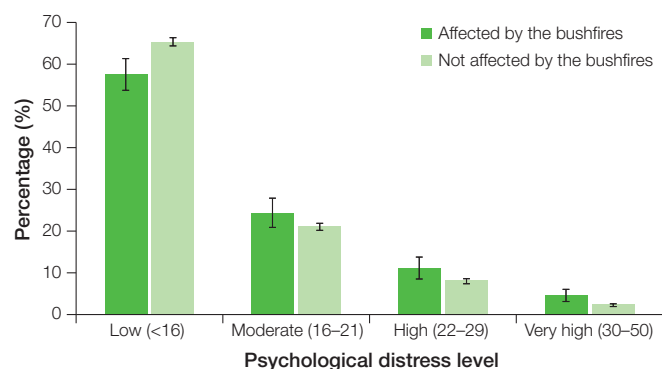
How are people faring now?

The survey showed that about one in five (21.9%) adult Victorians who were affected by the bushfires in 2009 experienced signs and symptoms of depression or anxiety as a result of the fires.

About one in ten (9.3%) adult Victorians accessed counselling or specialist mental health services as a result of the impact of the fires. Most Victorians who felt they required these services actually accessed them. Most of those who did not access these services felt they didn't need them (82.3%), didn't want them (6.8%), or felt sufficiently supported by family (4.3%).

The Kessler 10 Psychological Distress Scale¹ (K10) measures the level of psychological distress that a person has experienced in the preceding four weeks. Three years on from the fires, very high levels of psychological distress were more common in adult Victorians who were affected by the fires (4.6%), than in other adult Victorians (2.5%).

Levels of psychological distress in adult Victorians, 2011–12



Note: Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

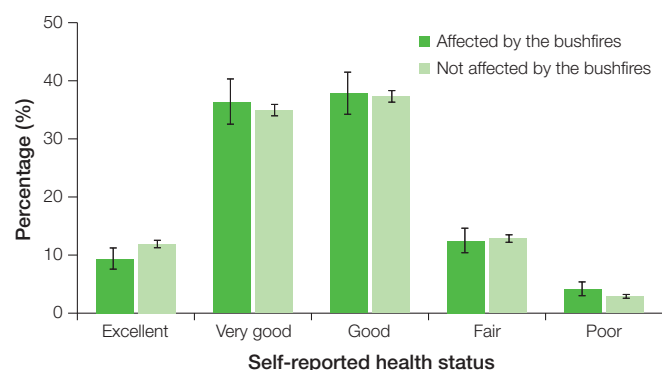
Data are age standardised to the 2011 Victorian estimated resident population (18 years+).

Levels of psychological distress are based on the K10.

What about their physical health?

When asked about their health, most (83.3%) adult Victorians who were affected by the fires reported having excellent, very good or good health.

Levels of self-reported health in adult Victorians, 2011–12



Note: Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Data are age standardised to the 2011 Victorian estimated resident population (18 years+).

Excellent health was less common for those affected by the fires (9.3%), than for other adult Victorians (11.9%).

Although there was no difference in the lifetime prevalence of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, high blood pressure or asthma, arthritis (25.1%) and osteoporosis (6.8%) were more common in adult Victorians who were affected by the fires, than in other adults (arthritis: 19.3%; osteoporosis: 5.1%).

Modifiable health risk behaviours with important implications for future health and wellbeing, such as current smoking² (19.9%), consuming alcohol at levels commensurate with risk of harm in the short term³ (51.7%) and excess bodyweight⁴ (57.7%), were more common in adult Victorians who were affected by the bushfires, than in other Victorians (smoking: 15.5%; risk of alcohol-related harm in short term: 44.9%; excess bodyweight: 50.0%).

...And their social wellbeing?

The survey showed that adult Victorians affected by the bushfires have a strong social environment, with good social and support networks. They are engaged with their community and they participate in civic activities – more so than other Victorians.

What does this information tell us?

Overall, adult Victorians affected by the bushfires in 2009 enjoy a high level of health. However, there are areas of concern, with disparities in health status. Three years on from the fires, the mental wellbeing of those affected remains an issue and there are opportunities for future health gain in reducing the prevalence of modifiable health risk behaviours.

This factsheet presents selected findings on the health and wellbeing of adult Victorians affected by the bushfires in 2009. The information has been derived from the Victorian Population Health Survey 2011–12. The full report is available at:

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/healthstatus/survey/vphs.htm>

1. The K10 is a set of ten questions designed to categorise the level of psychological distress experienced by an individual over a four week period and has been validated as a simple measure of anxiety, depression and worry (psychological distress).
2. Current smokers include those who smoke daily/occasionally.
3. Risk of harm is based on the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2001, *Australian alcohol guidelines: health risks and benefits*, NHMRC, Canberra.
4. Based on overweight and obese classifications for body mass index from the World Health Organisation (WHO) 2013, *BMI classification*, viewed 17 January 2013 at: <http://apps.who.int/bmi/index.jsp?introPage=intro_3.html>.