
After a bushfire - hazards on your property

Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures that are burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards in the remaining rubble and ash. Before going back to your property to clean up or retrieve personal items, be aware of the potential risks.

Hazardous material that may be present after a fire includes:

- > asbestos
- > ash from burnt treated timbers, such as copper chrome arsenate (CCA) timber
- > medicines
- > garden or farm chemicals
- > other general chemicals, such as cleaning products or pool chlorine
- > metals and other residues from burnt household appliances
- > ash and dust.

You should be aware that demolition of buildings or structures may require a permit from your local government authority.

Before going back to your property

For safety reasons, only adults should help clean up after a bushfire.

- > Do not enter your property until you have been told that it is safe by emergency services, Western Power or Horizon Power, or your local council.
 - > Buildings and other structures may be unstable to enter or walk on. Get advice from your local council building section to make sure it is safe before you enter.
 - > 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 – see below.
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Protective clothing

- > Wear strong enclosed shoes or boots 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 dispose of them with other waste after use.
- > Any non-disposable clothing (including shoes) should be washed or wet cleaned before reuse.
- > If the property or site contains asbestos, disposable overalls should be placed in a sealed bag after use and disposed of as asbestos waste.

What about wearing a face mask?

- > 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 face masks (called 'P1' or 'P2') should be worn. They are available at most hardware stores. 'P2' masks filter out a slightly higher proportion of fine particles than 'P1' and are the preferred choice.
- > Wearing a face mask can make it harder for you to breathe normally. If you have a heart or lung condition, talk to your doctor 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 trouble getting a good seal.

Cleaning up and handling wastes

Make sure you wear adequate protective clothing, gloves and shoes before handling any debris, ash or other waste.

- > Any items that could be flammable or toxic, such as gas bottles, petrol, drums/bottles of chemical or poison, should be left where they are or separated from other debris. Get advice from local fire safety officers on safely disposing of these items.
 - > Wetting down ash and debris with water will help to limit airborne dust before you start cleaning up. Do not use high pressure water sprays as these can stir up ash and dust.
 - > Don't spread ash around your property, particularly if asbestos material or CCA-treated timber was burnt.
 - > Building rubble should not be buried. Hazardous materials such as asbestos or chemicals may contaminate surrounding land, harming the environment and community.
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Asbestos hazards - clean-up and disposal

Buildings built before 1988 may contain asbestos cement (sometimes called 'AC' or 'ACM') sheeting in walls, roofs, floor underlays, eaves, chimney flues or asbestos in vinyl floor tiles and backing to sheet linoleum. These materials are generally not a health risk unless they are cut, broken, drilled or crushed, which releases asbestos fibres into the air.

During a bushfire, the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is likely to be low. After a bushfire, asbestos fibres can be disturbed by clean-up work.

If you suspect that your property could be heavily contaminated, for example asbestos in the soil, do not start clean-up until you have been told it is safe.

How to remove small amounts of asbestos

Small unburned quantities (a few sheets or fragments) of broken or damaged asbestos cement material or debris should be:

- > wet down with a hose or bucket (not a pressure cleaner)
- > carefully removed and wrapped securely in heavy duty plastic sheeting or bags
- > wrapped in bundles and clearly labelled with the words 'CAUTION ASBESTOS'
- > taken to a landfill site approved to accept asbestos.

Check with your local government for landfill sites.

Large amounts of asbestos

If large quantities of asbestos cement materials are present on soil or attached to buildings or structures, it is recommended you hire a licensed asbestos removalist. These can be found in the Yellow Pages under 'A' for Asbestos or by contacting WorkSafe on (08) 6251 2200 or 1300 307 877.

If you suspect that your property could be heavily contaminated, for example asbestos in the soil, do not start clean-up until you have been told it is safe.

Help with asbestos clean-up

For advice about asbestos contamination and safe clean-up practices, contact:

- > your local government Environmental Health Officer
- > Department of Health, Environmental Health Directorate phone (08) 9222 2000.

Ash from CCA-treated wood - clean-up and disposal

CCA-treated wood is commonly used in structures such as pergolas, decking, fencing and landscaping. After a fire, the ash from this wood contains up to 10 per cent (by weight) arsenic, copper and chromium.

Swallowing only a few grams of this can be harmful. Children, pets and other animals must be kept away from these ash areas until clean-up is completed.

- > Ash should be double-bagged, sealed and taken directly to your local landfill.
- > Damaged timber can also be taken to landfill.

More information about CCA-treated wood

Read more about [how to stay safe around copper chrome arsenate treated wood](#).

For advice on disposal, contact Environmental Health Services at your [local government \(external site\)](#).

Looking after your health

If you are cleaning up during hot weather, be aware of the [health risks of heat stress](#). Make sure you have:

- > bottled drinking water
- > food – perishable food should be kept cold in an esky or cooler bag
- > sunscreen
- > a hat.

For health advice on exposure to bushfire smoke or contact with material left after a bushfire:

- > See your doctor
- > Visit a [GP after hours](#)
- > Ring *healthdirect* on 1800 022 222

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More information

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Acknowledgements
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See also

- > Rainwater tanks after a bushfire
- > Smoke hazard from bushfires
- > Air pollution and health