

Smoke from a peat fire

Community fact sheet

The Department of Health and Human Services has prepared this general information so that you know what to do to protect your health and the health of anyone in your care who may be exposed to smoke from a peat fire.

For information about a specific fire or emergency incident, listen to your local emergency radio station for updates or visit www.emergency.vic.gov.au

If you are at the scene of an emergency, always follow the directions of emergency services, such as ambulance officers, police or fire services.

Key points about smoke from a peat fire

- Peat fires are uncommon and generally occur in locations away from populated areas. Peat fires smoulder for a long time and can be difficult to put out.
- Smoke contains fine particles, water vapour and gases including carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides. Some peat fires may produce sulfur compounds which can be odourous.
- For regular updates on what you should do, listen to your local emergency radio station or visit www.emergency.vic.gov.au
- People with a heart or lung condition, including asthma, children (up to 14 years), pregnant women and people over 65 years of age are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in smoke.
- If you have a heart or lung condition, take your medication as prescribed. Asthmatics should follow their personal asthma action plan and keep reliever medication on hand.
- If you or anyone in your care is experiencing symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure, call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24 or seek medical advice.
- Anyone experiencing difficulty breathing, wheezing or tightness in the chest should seek urgent medical assistance – call 000.

What is peat?

Peat is generated gradually in wetlands through the build-up of partially decayed vegetation.

Peat sources can be found above ground or buried many metres below the soil surface.

Peat is high in carbon content and naturally porous. If peat dries out, lightning strikes, bushfires and even extreme daytime temperatures may start a peat fire.

What is in peat fire smoke?

Most peat fires occur in locations away from populated areas, generally smoulder for a long time and are difficult to put out.

The area and depth of a peat fire determine how much smoke is produced. Smoke from burning peat:

- can reduce air quality close to the actual fire
- contains fine particles, water vapour, gases including carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides, and may contain sulfur compounds which are odourous
- is a health concern mainly for those closest to the fire, such as emergency services.

How can smoke affect my health?

Generally people who live or work very close to a peat fire may be exposed to the smoke.

How smoke affects your health depends on your age, whether you have an existing medical condition, how active you are in smoky conditions and how long you are exposed to the smoke.

People with a heart or lung condition, including asthma, children (up to 14 years), pregnant women and people over 65 years of age are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in smoke.

If you have a heart or lung condition, take your medication as prescribed.

Asthmatics should follow their personal asthma action plan and keep reliever medication on hand.

If you or anyone in your care experiences symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure, call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24 or seek medical advice.

Call 000 if anyone is having difficulty breathing or is experiencing wheezing or tightness in the chest.

What can I do to protect my health from smoke during a peat fire?

If you do not need to be in the area, stay away from a peat fire. Visit www.emergency.vic.gov.au for updates on air quality and other advice.

If you live or work close to the fire and it is smoky, reduce physical outdoor exercise or heavy physical activity. People with an existing heart or lung condition should rest as much as possible.

If you are not under threat from a fire, stay indoors away from the smoke where possible. Keep windows and doors closed.

If it is hot and you operate an air-conditioner, switch it to 'recirculate' or 'reuse air'. This limits the amount of smoke particles coming inside.

If your home is uncomfortable, and it is safe to do so, consider taking a break away from the smoke. Visit an area not affected by the smoke or visit a local air-conditioned building such as a library, community centre or shopping centre.

If it is safe to do so, check on elderly neighbours or other people who you think might need extra help.

What about wearing a face mask?

Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not protect you from fine smoke particles or gases.

Special face masks (P2 masks) provide better protection from breathing in fine smoke particles.

Before deciding to use a P2 mask, note that:

- they can be hot and uncomfortable to wear and make it harder to breathe normally
- anyone with an existing heart or lung condition should seek medical advice before using one
- they do not provide a close seal if someone has a beard
- they are not designed for a child's face
- they do not protect you from gases such as carbon monoxide.

I am concerned about the health of my pets. What should I do?

During smoky conditions, and if practical to do so, bring pets indoors with you.

If you have any concerns about the health of your pets, consult your local vet.

I am concerned about the health of my animals. What should I do?

If you have any concerns about the health of your animals, consult a vet or the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

Can I drink water from my rainwater tank?

Drink reticulated water. If you have a rainwater tank and the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not use it for drinking, bathing or for pets.

Contact the Environmental Health Officer at your local council or the Department of Health and Human Services for more information.

What should I do around the home?

If your house smells smoky and there is a break in the smoke, open the house to sunlight and fresh air, and air soft furnishings in the sunshine.

Wipe down indoor surfaces with water. Wash any visible surface film with soap and water.

If clothes were on the clothesline during smoky conditions, rewash them. If smoke is still present, dry clothes indoors or in a dryer.

Further information

Vic Emergency

For more information about specific incidents and emergencies go to: www.emergency.vic.gov.au

Local emergency radio station

For current information about specific incidents and emergencies, listen to your local emergency radio station.

NURSE-ON-CALL

For immediate health advice from a registered nurse, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, call 1300 60 60 24.

Department of Health and Human Services

For more information on the health effects of smoke from a peat fire, or rainwater tank water quality, call 1300 761 874 during business hours.

EPA Victoria

Information about air quality and other impacts of this fire on the environment is available from EPA Victoria on 1300 372 842.

Local government

Contact your local council for or advice about rainwater tank water quality.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email environmental.healthunit@dhhs.vic.gov.au

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