

Returning home safely after a bushfire

Community information

This document provides useful information for people returning home following the recent bushfires.

For the most up-to-date information about relief centres, community meetings and the support services available, contact your local council or call the VicEmergency Hotline on **1800 226 226** for general information.

Contents

Returning home safely after a bushfire	1
Private water sources	3
Food safety after a power failure	4
Power outages and alternative fuel and electricity generators	4
Farm recovery	5
Personal wellbeing and trauma	6
Where to get help	9
More information	10

Returning home safely after a bushfire

Check with your local emergency services that it is safe to return to your property after a bushfire; and where possible, try to avoid taking children onto fire-damaged properties. If you do, make sure they remain protected at all times.

Hazardous materials after a bushfire

Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards. These may include fallen or sharp objects, smouldering coals, damaged electrical wires, leaking gas and weakened walls.

When returning to your property, make sure you are aware of the dangers and take steps to protect your health and safety.

Hazardous materials that may be present after a bushfire include:

- asbestos
- ashes, especially from burnt treated timbers (such as copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA')
- LPG gas cylinders
- medication

- garden chemicals
- farm chemicals
- other general chemicals (for example, cleaning products)
- metal and other residues from burnt household appliances
- dust.

It is unsafe to spread ash around your property, particularly if asbestos materials were used in your home or other structures, or if CCA-treated timber was burnt. It is also unsafe to disturb the dust when walking around your property.

Wear protective clothing

Make sure you wear protective clothing before entering your property, including:

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves.
- Wear disposable overalls, with long sleeves and trousers.
- Wear a P2 face mask (P2 face masks are sometimes referred to as N95 masks).
- When leaving the property, dispose of gloves, coveralls and face masks into a garbage bag.
- Wash your hands after removing contaminate clothing . Shoes should be cleaned before being worn again.

Cleaning up your home after a bushfire

If your home has been damaged by fire or smells of smoke from bushfires, you should ventilate it by opening the house up to sunlight and fresh air to help remove the odour.

Wash indoor surfaces with mild soap or detergent and water. For persistent smoke and soot, wear rubber gloves and wash with four to six teaspoons of washing powder and one cup of household chlorine bleach added to four litres of water. Remember to always follow the safety directions on the bleach container.

Cooking utensils can be washed with detergent and hot water and polished with a suitable polishing agent to remove discolouration.

Air soft furnishings (upholstered furniture and bedding) outside in the sunshine and wind. Mattresses may be able to be cleaned by a specialist mattress repairer. It is almost impossible to get the smell of smoke out of feather pillows or foam.

Low levels of ash on household surfaces are unlikely to cause short or long-term health effects. If anyone in your household is experiencing any health effects from the smoky conditions seek medical advice.

Washing affected clothing after a bushfire

Wash affected clothing normally and air dry outside in the sunshine and wind. Persistent stains and smoke odour can be sometimes washed from clothing using four to six teaspoons of washing powder and one cup of household chlorine bleach added to four litres of water. After washing, rinse clothes with clean water and dry well.

Remember to wear gloves and follow the safety directions on the bleach container. Care should be taken as this mix will bleach clothes.

Clothes left on the clothes line should be rewashed. While wind may have removed some smoke odour, soot, particles and ash may have been deposited on them. Rewashing protects sensitive skin (for example, babies) from possible irritants.

Private water sources

If you use a private drinking water source, you should be aware that your it could be contaminated with debris, ash, fire retardants or dead animals.

You should not source water from a creek that has been affected by bushfire as the water may be contaminated.

Water drawn from deep bores or wells should still be safe to use.

Detecting tank water contamination

If your water looks, smells or tastes unusual, then it is likely to be contaminated. Do not use the water for drinking or food preparation, and do not give it to animals.

Water that is not suitable for drinking can still be used on the garden. Water testing is not necessary, as contamination is easily identified by a change in taste, smell or clarity.

Debris or dead animals on your roof or in the gutters should be removed. Use gloves and place in a plastic bag for disposal. Your tank water should be disinfected before re-using.

When to resume using your rainwater tank for drinking

If the water in your tank has not been contaminated, the water should be safe to use. However, do not re connect

your downpipes until your roof has been cleaned.

Only clean the ash and debris from your roof and gutters when it is safe to do so.

If your tank needs cleaning, it is recommended that you contact a specialist contractor, as working in a confined space is dangerous.

Disinfecting tank water

Water can be disinfected by bringing it to a rolling boil or by adding chlorine. For every 1,000 litres of water in the tank, you can safely add either:

- Approximately 125 ml or 125 g of 4 per cent household bleach. Avoid using bleaches that contain detergents
- or other chemicals, such as perfumes
- Approximately 40 ml or 40 g of 12.5 per cent chlorine liquid swimming pool chlorine or dairy factory chlorine
- Approximately 8 ml or 8 g of 65 per cent granular 'swimming pool' chlorine
- After chlorinating, you should wait at least 24 hours before using the water to allow for harmful microorganisms to be treated.

Food safety after a power failure

- Try to keep cold and frozen food as cold as possible. This is the most important thing. If food is still cold to touch (less than 5 °C), it is safe to use
- Once cold or frozen food is no longer cold to touch, it can be kept and eaten for up to four hours and then it must be thrown away or, if it is raw meat, it should be cooked and eaten
- Eat hot food within four hours of it being hot, or throw it away
- If the power comes back on when frozen food is still solid the food is safe to refreeze.

Power outages and alternative fuel and electricity generators

Power outages are a possibility when returning home. Portable generators can allow some normal activities to continue; however, it is important to use them carefully.

Petrol or diesel powered generators can produce carbon monoxide gas so must only be operated in a well-ventilated outdoor area away from open windows and vents.

Carbon monoxide is invisible and you cannot smell it. If it builds up in a home, garage or caravan it can cause sudden illness, loss of consciousness and death. Think about your pets as well as your family.

Do not use appliances designed for outdoor use inside a home, basement, garage, caravan or tent, or even outside near an open window. Appliances such as power generators, grills, camp stoves or other petrol, LP gas, natural gas or charcoal-burning devices should only be used as specified by the manufacturer.

Using power generators

Although they are very useful, if not used safely portable generators can lead to:

- Carbon monoxide poisoning from the engine exhaust.
- Electric shock or electrocution.
- Fire.

Householders must follow the directions supplied with the generator to ensure safe use.

- **Do not use a portable generator indoors.** This includes inside a garage, carport, basement, crawlspace or other enclosed or partially enclosed area, even with ventilation
- Operate the generator outdoors away from windows
- Read the manufacturer's instructions before use
- Do not overload the generator
- Switch the generator off when refuelling or when not in use
- Opening doors and windows will not prevent carbon monoxide building up in the home. It is a good idea to install battery-operated carbon monoxide alarms in your home to alert you when carbon monoxide levels pose a health risk. Test the battery frequently and replace when needed.

To avoid electrocution

- Keep the generator dry and do not use it in the rain
- To protect the generator from moisture, use it on a dry surface under an open canopy-like structure, such as a tarpaulin held up on poles
- Always dry your hands before touching the generator.

Refuelling a generator

- Ensure the generator is off and cool before refuelling. Petrol spilled on hot engine parts can ignite
- Store petrol outside the home in a locked shed or other protected area
- Do not store any fuel near a fuel-burning appliance (such as a natural gas water heater or near a car in a garage).

Using appliances connected to a generator

If returning to a property that has been significantly damaged by fire or strong winds, it is important to first check the wiring and other electrical installations before connecting and turning on any appliances.

Additionally you should:

- Plug appliances directly into the generator via a heavy duty, outdoor-rated extension cord
- Use short extension leads that are in good condition, and plugs that have all three prongs
- Fully unwind extension leads from reels or drums.

Do not try to power the house wiring by plugging the generator into a wall outlet. This can 'back feed' along the power lines and is extremely dangerous to you and your neighbours.

Preventing carbon monoxide poisoning

- Never use a gas stove or oven to heat a home.
- Never use a charcoal grill, hibachi, lantern or portable camping stove inside a home, tent or caravan.
- Never run a generator, pressure washer or any fuel-powered engine inside a basement, garage or other enclosed structure, even if the doors or windows are open, unless the equipment is professionally installed and vented.
- Keep vents and flues free of debris, especially if winds are high, as flying debris can block ventilation openings.
- Never run a motor vehicle, generator, pressure washer or any fuel-powered engine outside an open window, door or vent where exhaust can vent into an enclosed area.
- Never leave the motor running in a vehicle parked in an enclosed or partially enclosed space such as a garage.
- If you start to feel sick, dizzy or weak, get to fresh air immediately and get immediate medical advice.

Farm recovery

Agriculture Victoria Animal Health staff will enter fire affected areas when it is safe to do so. Farmers wishing to report livestock impacted by fires should call 53366721.

Agriculture Victoria has information for landholders bushfire affected crops, water supplies, soils, pastures and information about assisting livestock after an emergency.

Visit: <http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/emergencies/recovery/livestock-after-an-emergency>

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning website has details for landholders for repair of fences and the replacement of essential water after a bushfire.

Visit: <https://www.ffm.vic.gov.au/recovery-after-an-emergency/public-land-recovery>

Road closures

Many roads are closed around the cluster of fires in South West of the State. Check the VicRoads website: www.traffic.vicroads.vic.gov.au for further information.

Personal wellbeing and trauma

It is normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions following a distressing event. On most occasions though, these reactions subside as a part of the body's natural healing and recovery process. There are many things you can do to help cope with and recover from such an experience.

A traumatic experience is any event in life that causes a threat to our safety and potentially places our own life or the lives of others at risk. As a result, a person experiences high levels of emotional, psychological, and physical distress that temporarily disrupts their ability to function normally in day-to-day life.

Examples of potentially traumatic experiences include natural disasters, such as a bushfire or flood, being witness to an armed robbery, having a serious car accident, being in a plane that is forced to make an emergency landing, or being physically assaulted.

Reactions to trauma

The way a person reacts to trauma depends on many things, such as the type and severity of the traumatic event, the amount of available support for the person following the incident, other stressors currently being experienced in the person's life, the existence of certain personality traits, natural levels of resilience, and whether the person has had any traumatic experiences before.

Common reactions include a range of mental, emotional, physical and behavioural responses. These reactions are normal and, in most cases, they subside as a part of the body's natural healing and recovery process.

Examples of common reactions to trauma are:

- feeling as if you are in a state of 'high alert' and are 'on watch' for anything else that might happen
- feeling emotionally numb, as if in a state of 'shock'
- becoming emotional and upset
- feeling extremely fatigued and tired
- feeling very stressed and/or anxious
- being very protective of others including family and friends
- not wanting to leave a particular place for fear of 'what might happen'.

Mental reactions to trauma

Mental reactions to trauma include:

- reduced concentration and memory
- intrusive thoughts about the event
- repeatedly playing parts of the event over in the mind
- confusion or disorientation.

Emotional reactions to trauma

Emotional reactions to trauma can include:

- fear, anxiety and panic
- shock – difficulty believing in what has happened, feeling detached and confused
- feeling numb
- not wanting to connect with others or becoming withdrawn from those around you
- continuing alarm – feeling like the danger is still there or the event is continuing
- let-down – after the crisis is over, exhaustion may become obvious. Emotional reactions to the event are felt during the let-down phase, and include depression, avoidance, guilt, oversensitivity, and withdrawal.

Physical reactions to trauma

Traumatic experiences can result in physical reactions including:

- fatigue or exhaustion
- disturbed sleep
- nausea, vomiting and dizziness
- headaches
- excessive sweating
- increased heart rate.

Behavioural reactions to trauma

Common behavioural reactions to trauma include:

- avoiding reminders of the event
- inability to stop focusing on what occurred
- getting immersed in recovery-related tasks
- losing touch with normal daily routines
- changed appetite, such as eating a lot more or a lot less
- turning to substances such as alcohol, cigarettes and coffee
- sleeping problems.

Making sense of the traumatic event

Once the distressing event is over, you may find yourself trying to make sense of the event. This can include thinking about: how and why it happened, how and why you were involved, why you feel the way you do, whether feelings you now have reflect on what kind of person you are, whether the experience has changed your view on life, and how.

Helping resolve traumatic reactions to trauma

There are a number of strategies that can be put in place to help a person resolve traumatic reactions.

Some common well identified examples include:

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing or frightening experience and that you will have a reaction to it
- Accept that you will not feel your normal self for a period of time, but that it will also eventually pass
- Remind yourself daily that you are managing – try not to get angry or frustrated with yourself if you are not able to do things as well or efficiently as normal
- Don't overuse alcohol or drugs to help you cope
- Avoid making major decisions or big life changes until you feel better
- Gradually confront what has happened – don't try to block it out
- Don't bottle up your feelings – talk to someone who can support and understand you
- Try to keep to your normal routine and stay busy
- Don't go out of your way to avoid certain places or activities. Don't let the trauma confine your life, but take your time to get back to normal
- When you feel exhausted, make sure you set aside time to rest
- Make time for regular exercise – it helps cleanse your body and mind of tension
- Help your family and friends to help you by telling them what you need, such as time out or someone to talk to
- Relax – use relaxation techniques such as yoga, breathing or meditation, or do things you enjoy, such as listening to music or gardening
- Express your feelings as they arise – talk to someone about your feelings or write them down
- When the trauma brings up memories or feelings, try to confront them. Think about them, then put them aside. If it brings up other past memories, try to keep them separate from the current problem and deal with them separately.

Healing and recovery process

Any event that places a person's own life or the lives of others at risk results in the human body going into a state of heightened arousal. This is like an 'emergency mode' that involves a series of internal alarms being turned on. Emergency mode gives people the capacity to access a lot of energy in a short period of time to maximise the chance of survival.

Most people only stay in emergency mode for a short period of time or until the immediate threat has passed. However, being in emergency mode uses up vital energy supplies and this is why people often feel quite tired afterwards.

The normal healing and recovery process involves the body coming down out of a state of heightened arousal. In other words, the internal alarms turn off, the high levels of energy subside, and the body re-sets itself to a normal state of balance and equilibrium. Typically, this should occur within approximately one month of the event.

Information to support families and children with coping after a crisis can be found:

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/trauma-and-families>

Where to get help

Emergency relief financial assistance

Emergency Relief and Re-establishment Assistance is now being made available to eligible fire-affected community members.

Assistance for the local government areas of Colac-Otway, Corangamite, Moyne and Southern Grampians is being provided through the jointly funded Commonwealth-State Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA).

Individuals in the local government areas of Colac-Otway, Corangamite, Moyne and Southern Grampians can now access the following emergency assistance to relieve personal hardship and distress:

- Personal Hardship Assistance Payments, which provide payments of up to \$540 per adult and \$270 per child (up to a maximum of \$1,890 per household) are available to help meet immediate needs, including emergency food, shelter, clothing, and personal items.
- Emergency Re-establishment Assistance provides up to \$40,700 per eligible household that has been affected by fire at their primary place of residence. The grants are available for eligible clean-up, emergency accommodation, repairs, rebuilding (a principal place of residence), and replacing some damaged contents.

A needs assessment is carried out at a relief centre or by contacting your council.

Insurance

If you have property or contents insurance you should contact your insurance company as soon as possible after the fire.

- Ask your insurer for advice on actions you should take
- Do not discard or throw away damaged items without first consulting your insurance company
- Make a list of items that have been damaged and take photographs if possible
- Keep receipts for any emergency repair work.

General enquiries: 02 9253 5100 or 1300 728 228 from 8:30am to 5pm Monday to Friday.

For further details on insurance advice see the Understand Insurance website:

<http://understandinsurance.com.au/types-of-disasters/bushfires>

Personal well-being

There are a number support services available to assist you and your family recover from the strong emotional or physical reactions you may be experiencing following this distressing event.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Or contact:

- Your doctor, local community health centre or Medicare Local
- Counsellor or Psychologist
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89 or the Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)

- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497

More information

Information will be provided by local council and authorities as it comes to hand.

Contact the VicEmergency Hotline on **1800 226 226** for general information or visit:

www.emergency.vic.gov.au/relief/#southwest_fires_march_2018.

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