

After a fire: private drinking water and water tank safety

Community information

If you live in a bushfire-affected area your drinking water tank could have become contaminated from debris, ash, dead animals or aerial fire retardants.

If the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not drink it or give it to animals.

Water from a river or creek should never be used for drinking or preparing food unless it has been properly treated.

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

How can I prevent my drinking water tank from becoming contaminated?

Prior to a bushfire:

- ensure your tank is properly sealed and maintained
- disconnect the downpipes to your tanks as soon as there is a bushfire risk.

After a bushfire:

- only reconnect the downpipes when the roof has been cleaned (either manually or after a good flush of rain).

What if it rains before I can disconnect the downpipes?

- Prior to using your water inspect your roof, gutters and if possible look inside your tank for signs of contamination.
- Water testing is not necessary because contamination is usually obvious.
- If your water has been contaminated the taste, colour or smell, will change.
- Contaminated water should not be used for drinking or preparing food. Use an alternate supply for drinking.
- Tank water that is not suitable for drinking can be used on the garden.

What do I do if there are dead animals in my drinking water system?

Wear gloves to remove dead animals from your roof, your gutters or in your tank. Dispose gloves after use, and disinfect your tank water before re-using it. Water can be disinfected by bringing the water to a rolling boil, or by using chlorine (bleach).

To boil water for drinking purposes: bring water to a boil by heating water until a continuous and rapid stream of air-bubble is produced from the bottom of a pan or kettle. Kettles with automatic shut off switches are suitable.

To disinfect your tank water using chlorine, use the following instructions.

For every 1,000 litres of water in your tank you can safely add:

- approximately 125 mL or 125 g of 4 per cent chlorine household bleach (avoid bleaches that contain detergents or perfumes), or
- approximately 40 mL or 40 g of 12.5 per cent chlorine liquid swimming pool or dairy factory chlorine, or
- approximately 8 mL or 8 g of 65 per cent granular 'swimming pool' chlorine.

Note: one teaspoon is approximately five grams.

Wait at least 24 hours before using the water to allow for microorganisms to be destroyed.

After chlorinating, you should wait at least 24 hours before using the water to allow for microorganisms to be destroyed.

How soon after a fire can I use my drinking water tank?

If the water in your tank has not been contaminated, the water should be safe to drink. However, do not reconnect your downpipes until your roof has been cleaned or after a good flush of rain.

- Only clean the ash and debris from your roof and gutters when it is safe to do so.
- It should not be necessary to clean your tank after a fire unless it is grossly polluted or smells and tastes unusual as a result of aerial fire retardants.
- If you want your tank cleaned it is best to employ a specialist. Working in a confined space is dangerous.

For further information

- For local water cartage or tank cleaners, contact the environmental health section of your local council.
- For general information on fires in Victoria, contact the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667.

For more bushfire and public health information, refer to the bushfire information fact sheets available from the Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health and Human Services at:

www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/bushfires