

## After a Bushfire

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### Introduction

Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures that are burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards in the remaining rubble, ash and debris.

### Public health significance

Hazardous household materials - may be present after the fire and include asbestos, ash from burnt treated timbers (i.e. copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA'), medicines, and garden or farm chemicals. Also be aware that hot, smouldering coals/ash and other potentially hazardous materials may be hidden under debris.

Electrical hazards - may include "live" powerlines that may be down.

Buildings and other structures - may be unstable to enter or walk over.

Therefore, before attempting to recover items or start any cleanup works, seek advice from your Local Council to make sure it is safe to enter.

### Action to take:

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves to protect you from cuts from broken glass, standing on sharp objects or getting burnt by smouldering coals.
- Wear protective overalls (with long sleeves and trousers).
- Special masks (called 'P1' or 'P2') should be worn to filter out fine particles, including asbestos fibres. They are available at most hardware stores.
- Building wastes/debris should **not** be buried on-site, or in nearby gullies, as hazardous materials in the waste may contaminate surrounding land, harming the environment and the community.
- Buildings built before 1988 may contain asbestos cement (or 'AC') sheeting in walls and roofs. These sheeting materials are generally not a risk to health unless they are broken up cut or ground releasing asbestos fibres. If asbestos is likely to be present on your property, a licensed asbestos removalist should be engaged to do the cleanup work.
- Spreading ash around the property is not recommended, particularly if asbestos materials were used in your home or other structures, or CCA-treated timber posts, structures etc. were burnt. After a fire, the remaining ash/char contains up to 10% (by weight) arsenic, copper and chromium. Young children are more likely to put things in their mouths. Eating only a few grams can be harmful. Animals may also lick or eat the salty ash residue leading to poisoning. Therefore, children, pets and other animals must be kept away from these ash areas until cleanup is completed.
- Airborne dust/ash can be minimised by keeping the waste debris wet. Do not use high pressure water sprays for this purpose as this can stir up the dust/ash.

### Acknowledgement:

Information for this document was sourced from the Environmental Health Unit, Victorian Government Department of Human Services Dec.2005.

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### Related links:

- Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) at website: [www.emergency.qld.gov.au/emq/css/beprepared.asp](http://www.emergency.qld.gov.au/emq/css/beprepared.asp)
- Emergency Management Australia Community Awareness Publications at website: [www.ema.gov.au/www/emaweb/emaweb.nsf/Page/Publications](http://www.ema.gov.au/www/emaweb/emaweb.nsf/Page/Publications)
- Workplace Health & Safety Queensland at website: [www.deir.qld.gov.au/](http://www.deir.qld.gov.au/)