

Important information for communities affected by bushfire



Emotional assistance

If you're returning home after a bushfire, it can help to prepare mentally for what you're going to see.

People have all kinds of emotional and physical reactions – they are normal and part of the healing process. Relief, uncertainty, distress, anger, grief are all normal.

If you or a loved one need support during this difficult time visit your GP or call the Victorian Bushfires Case Support Program for more information about the mental support services available in your area.

**Call: 1800 560 760 - 8am – 6pm weekdays
and 9am – 5pm on weekends**

Email: bushfirerecovery@windermere.org.au

It can be really helpful to talk to someone who's independent but still understanding. Here are some services that are here for you or others you know.

- LifeLine – phone 131 114 - A 24-hour telephone service that offers confidential support and advice to help you deal with stress and personal challenges.
- Beyondblue information line – phone 1300 224 636 - An information line that offers expert information on depression; how to recognise the signs of depression, how to get help, how to help someone else and how to stay well.
- Mensline – phone 1300 789 978 - A telephone support, information and referral service, helping men deal with their relationship problems.
- Nurse-on-Call – phone 1300 60 60 24 - A 24-hour telephone service that allows people to discuss any health-related issue with a registered nurse for the cost of a local call.
- Parentline Victoria – phone 13 22 89 – Available 8am – midnight, 7 days a week a telephone service for parents and carers of children from birth to 18 years old, which offers confidential and anonymous counselling and support on parenting issues.
- Kids Help Line - phone 1800 551 800 – A 24-hour telephone service that provides phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25.

Bushfires Case Support Program

There are so many things to be done after a bushfire – from cleaning up to applying for support to making a plan for the future. It's sometimes hard to know what to do first.

Bushfires Case Support Program can provide you with practical support following the bushfires. This is a FREE service for people in East Gippsland and North East Victoria who have been impacted by the fires. To access this program or find out more:

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Case support coordinators can help you with:

- discussing your needs and the next steps you could take
- information and support to access recovery and mental health services
- completing paperwork
- community information
- financial counselling and assistance with insurance
- advice for business owners
- small amount of financial support to help with immediate needs.

Support can be provided face to face, over the phone or at a location that suits you.

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

For assistance with insurance contact the Insurance Council of Australia on 1800 734 621 (24 hour hotline). You can find information on lodging a claim following a disaster here: www.disasters.org.au.

Safely accessing your property

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.

- Wear protective clothing before entering your property after a bushfire.
- Where possible, try to avoid taking children onto fire-damaged properties. If you do, make sure they remain protected at all times.
- Hazardous wastes, such as asbestos materials and burnt CCA-treated timber, need special care during handling and disposal.

Smoke and ash

Smoke can contain fine particles, which present a health concern because they can be breathed into your lungs. These are the particles that can be present in ash and soot. Ash and soot can be irritating to the lungs and the skin. Breathing these fine particles deeply into the lungs can cause breathing problems and worsen pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma and heart disease.

Signs of short-term irritation such as itchy eyes, skin irritations, sore throat, runny nose and coughing usually clear up in healthy adults once you're away from the smoke.

If these symptoms don't improve quickly once you're away from the smoke, contact NURSE-ON-CALL (1300 60 60 24) or seek medical advice.

- Take medications if you have pre-existing medical conditions, such as asthma or heart disease.
- Wash ash off your hands, face and neck.
- If ash gets in your eyes, gently wash them out with clean water.
- Practise good hygiene, and wipe down surfaces with soap and water

Managing waste removal after bushfires

Prevent further damage to your environment by disposing of bushfire waste responsibly.

- Call your Bushfire Recovery Victoria case manager on 1800 560 760 for more information on how to handle any waste from your property, home or business.
- We recommend you do not inspect burnt building rubble or take any waste to landfill yourself.
- If you decide to inspect, protect yourself by wetting down the area to reduce dust and wear protective clothing including a P2 mask.
- The Department of Health and Human Services can provide protective clothing to community members returning to fire affected areas. These kits can be collected from local relief centres or from local councils.
- At this stage, do not commence clean-up by taking trailer loads of bushfire waste to local landfill facilities, as only appropriate facilities will be able to receive your bushfire waste.

Asbestos

- It is recommended that you use a licensed asbestos removalist to perform cleanup work. They know how to remove and dispose of asbestos safely, and without risk to you and your neighbours. If you are using a contractor to remove asbestos, they must be licensed by WorkSafe Victoria.
- Worksafe's website (worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos) has a list of licensed asbestos removalists. You can also contact Worksafe on 1800 136 089.
- EPA can provide you more information about the disposal of asbestos as a waste product. Visit epa.vic.gov.au or call on 1300 372 842 (1300 EPA VIC) for more information.

Injured livestock and pets

- If you have any injured livestock, please report it to Agriculture Victoria on 1800 226 226 so that Agriculture Victoria animal health staff can assist with assessing and managing livestock.
- If you have injured pets, please seek advice immediately from your local vet.

Food safety

After a fire, smoke and other contaminants can potentially affect food.

- When in doubt, throw it out!
- Be thorough when inspecting your kitchen for damage from smoke, heat, water, and firefighting foam.
- Throw out all food items, sealed or unsealed impacted by the fire, as they could be contaminated. This includes food in cans and jars even if they appear OK, any raw food, and food packaged in cardboard and plastic wrap.
- Get rid of food that is smelly, slimy, mouldy or discoloured.
- Throw out food from a refrigerator if the power has been off and the food is no longer cold to touch (less than 5oC). Throw out the food if you are unsure whether the power has been off more than four hours.
- Once cold or frozen food has warmed or thawed, it should be thrown out.
- Many kitchen appliances such as fridges, freezers, and microwaves may be damaged, even if they seem to be functioning right after the fire. Inspect them thoroughly. They may need to be replaced. Contaminants may accumulate on sensitive electronic circuits, that may cause short-circuiting.
- Carefully check dishes, pots, pans, cutlery and kitchen equipment that might have been damaged or contaminated by the fire.
- Throw away any damaged or cracked items, items made from porous material such as wood, plastic or rubber including wooden chopping boards as they cannot be adequately sanitised.
- Wash cooking utensils and clean cupboards and counters in hot soapy water, then sanitise with 1 tablespoon of chlorine bleach per 2 litres of hot water and rinse with drinking quality water before use.

Water tanks

- If you suspect your tank water is contaminated, or the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not drink, use for food preparation, brushing teeth or give to animals (pets or livestock) as it may be affected by the following:
 - fire retardants or water from water-bombing, which may have been used around your property. There is a potential that these may have entered your tank.
 - ash or debris on your roof catchment. Disconnect your downpipes prior to a rain event. This will help prevent further debris and ash entering your tank.
- Use bottled water for drinking.
- Boiling water does not remove fire retardants or other chemicals from your water. Fire affected water in your tank can still be used for irrigation and firefighting purposes. Water testing is not necessary.
- If your tank needs to be cleaned, get a professional tank cleaner. Never enter a tank. Tanks are confined spaces and are very dangerous; the risks include loss of consciousness, asphyxiation and death.
- Once the tank has been professionally drained and cleaned, refill with water from a source known to be safe for drinking.

Emergency water

- Residents in bushfire affected areas who are without drinking and domestic water supply due to tank contamination can contact South East Water who are providing bushfire aid to tank water users in the affected North East Victoria and East Gippsland regions.
- Eligible permanent residents in the declared bushfire affected areas of East Gippsland and some parts of the Wellington Shire will be provided a tank water flush and top-up of 5,000 litres.
- Anyone seeking emergency water assistance from the bushfire affected areas should contact South East Water on 131 851.

Septic tanks

If you have a septic tank, remember it may have been weakened in the fire so do not drive or walk over it. If you suspect your septic tank has been physically damaged, contact a licenced plumber to have it assessed.

Legal assistance

Disaster Legal Help Victoria provides free legal advice, assistance and referrals to people affected by a disaster. If you have been affected by the recent bushfires, they can help with issues such as insurance claims, tenancy disputes, debt and other financial problems.

For assistance, please phone Disaster Legal Help Victoria's free helpline on 1800 113 432. This phone line is open throughout the year between 8am and 6pm, Monday to Friday.

Temporary accommodation

Where possible people are being encouraged to arrange their own accommodation with family and friends.

If you need accommodation please call the Bushfires Case Support Program

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For more information:

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

Supporting children

Like any of us, children can feel overwhelmed and devastated when directly affected by bushfires or from the scenes that emerge afterward. Sometimes, they don't have ways of understanding what they see and can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of anxiety, stress and sadness.

At the same time, children can also have a natural ability to be resilient and adapt to challenging events.

Here are some signs to look out:

- a child becoming more clingy towards a parent or carer – for example wanting to be held more than usual, wanting to be with parents or carers, asking about fire, seeking reassurance
- changes to sleeping or eating patterns, or both
- the emergence of new physical complaints – such as stomach ache or headache
- changes in mood – such as being more easily irritable, or shutting down
- changes in a child's behaviour or learning at school
- appearing on edge and frightened – for example, being more easily startled, developing new fears, having nightmares or regression in behaviour.

If you (or one of your child's carers) notice these or other changes then it is important to ask the child what they are worried about. Talk to them in a way that is open and appropriate to their age. Listen to their questions and fears and show them that you understand.

If you are concerned and need assistance you can get help from your doctor, local community health centre, psychologist, **Beyond Blue** Tel. 1300 224 636 **Parentline Victoria** Tel. 13 22 89, **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 551 800, **Lifeline** Tel.131 114, and **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours 7 days).