

Returning to your property safely after a bushfire

January 2013

Returning to your property after a bushfire can be hazardous. Buildings or structures burnt in a bush fire can present many dangers including fallen or sharp objects, broken glass, smouldering coals, damaged or live electrical wires, leaking gas, weakened walls and hazardous materials, for example asbestos, ash from burnt treated timbers, and farm/garden chemicals.

Take steps to protect your health and safety.

Before entering your property

- Check with local emergency services that it is safe and you have permission to return.
- Consider seeking medical advice before returning to your property if you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition.
- Find alternative care for children and pets. Access should be limited until hazards are cleared.
- Be prepared. Returning to your property may be stressful and exhausting. It's best to limit time spent at your property if it has been burnt out.
- Take a garbage bag with you, for you to put your protective clothing in when you leave the property.
- If you intend to be at your property for an extended period, remember to take:
 - bottled drinking water (it may not be safe to drink water from your rainwater tank, see separate fact sheet re bushfires and rainwater tanks)
 - soap, water and alcohol-based hand gel to clean your hands before eating and after going to the toilet
 - sunscreen and a hat
 - food – perishable food should be kept cool in an esky or cooler bag.
- Put on protective gear (see below) *before* entering your property:
 - sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves
 - overalls, with long sleeves and trousers (preferably disposable)
 - a P2 face mask (sometimes called N95 masks) especially if asbestos may be present (note ordinary paper dust masks and bandannas do not filter out fine ash or dusts or asbestos fibres; P2 masks are available at most hardware stores).
- Leave your protective gear on while you are on the property.

At your property

- Minimise disturbance of dust and ash, which may contain hazardous materials. Moisten ash with water to minimise dust. Do not use high-pressure water sprays as this can stir up dust.
- Do not spread ash around your property, particularly if asbestos or ash from CCA-treated timber may be present.
- If you have a septic tank, it may have been weakened; do not drive or walk over it.
- If you have a rainwater tank, you will need to check for water contamination. See separate fact sheet: *Keeping rainwater tanks safe in areas affected by bushfires, DHHS January 2013.*

Hazardous materials

- Be alert for hazardous materials including asbestos, ash from burnt treated timbers (such as copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA'), LPG gas cylinders, chemicals (garden/farm), cleaning products, medicines and metal and other residues from burnt household appliances.
- Buildings built before 1990 may contain asbestos cement sheeting. Asbestos is not generally a health risk unless it is cut or broken up, when they may release asbestos fibres. During a bushfire, the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is likely to be low. After a bushfire, fibres may become airborne when the asbestos is disturbed. If asbestos is likely to be present on your property, a licensed asbestos removalist should be engaged to do the clean-up work. It is very difficult to identify asbestos just by looking at it.
- More information about hazardous materials that may be present on your property, and how to deal with them is available from Workplace Standards (phone 1300 366 322; http://workplacestandards.tas.gov.au/safety/bushfire_recovery)

Food spoilage

- If you are returning to your home and your fridge or freezer is intact, throw away all perishable food if the power has been off for more than a day.
- For shorter outages, if food is still cold to touch (less than 5°C) it is safe to use. Try to keep the food cold. Don't open your fridge or freezer door unnecessarily.
- Refrigerated food will spoil sooner than frozen food. Eat perishable foods (e.g. dairy and meat products) in your fridge first.
- Once cold or frozen food is no longer cold to touch (5°C or above) it must be eaten within four hours or thrown away. Raw meat should be cooked properly before being eaten.
- Eat hot (cooked) food within four hours of it being hot or throw it away.
- If power is restored when frozen food is still solid the food is safe to refreeze.
- Throw out food that has started to spoil, especially if it smells bad, tastes strange or is slimy.

Leaving your property

- Remove protective clothing.
- Dispose of gloves, overalls and face masks in a garbage bag.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap .
- Clean shoes before wearing them again.