



Delivering a Healthy WA



Government of Western Australia
Department of Health

Public Health Information Sheet Hazards on your property after a Bushfire

Introduction

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

Hazardous household materials that may be present after the fire include asbestos, ash from burnt treated timbers (i.e. copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA' timber), medicines, garden or farm chemicals, other general chemicals (e.g. cleaning products, pool chlorine etc.), metals and other residues from burnt household appliances as well as ash and dusts.

Before visiting your property (to recover personal items or arrange cleanup activities), consider the following precautions to protect your health. For safety reasons, access should be limited to adults.

Before going on-site

- Electrical hazards may exist (such as "live" powerlines that may be down). Do not enter your property until you have been advised that it is safe (by officers from emergency services, Western Power or local council).
- Buildings and other structures may be unstable to enter or walk on. Before attempting to recover items or start any cleanup works, seek advice from your local Council Building Section to make sure it is safe. *Demolition of buildings of structures may require a permit from your local Council.*
- Be aware that hot, smouldering coals and other potentially hazardous materials may be hidden under the rubble. If you think buildings on your property may contain asbestos cement sheeting, take extra care when handling building debris to avoid further breakage and potential release of asbestos fibres.

Personal protective clothing (PPE)

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy duty work gloves to protect you from broken glass, standing on sharp objects or getting burnt by smouldering coals.
- Wear protective overalls (with long sleeves and trousers). If convenient, wear disposable coveralls and dispose of them with other waste after use.
- Any non-disposable clothing (including shoes) should be washed or wet cleaned before reuse. *If the property or site contains asbestos, disposable overalls should be placed in a sealed bag after use and disposed of as asbestos waste.*

What about wearing a facemask? (PPE)

- Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine ash or dusts or any asbestos fibres that may remain. They are generally *not* very useful in protecting your lungs.

- Special facemasks (called 'P1' or 'P2') should be worn to filter out fine particles, including asbestos fibres. They are available at most hardware stores. 'P2' masks filter out a slightly higher proportion of fine particles than 'P1' and are the preferred choice.
- Wearing a facemask can make it harder for you to breathe normally. If you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition, seek your doctor's advice before using one.
- You should note that these types of masks are much less effective if there is a poor seal around the face and mouth. Men with facial hair, especially beards, can have difficulty getting a good seal.

Entering site / handling of wastes

- *Make sure* you wear adequate PPE (see above) before handling any debris, ash or other waste to retrieve personal items, etc. Any item that you suspect is flammable or toxic (gas bottles, petrol, drums/bottles of chemical or poison), should be left in situ or separated from other debris, until advice is sought from local fire safety officers on its safe disposal.
- Wetting down ash and debris with water will help to minimise airborne dust before clean up actions commence. Do not use high pressure water sprays as this can stir up ash and dust.
- Don't spread ash around your property, particularly, if asbestos materials were used in your home or structures or CCA-treated timber was burnt.
- Building rubble should not be buried on-site, or nearby land, as hazardous materials in it (such as asbestos, chemicals) may contaminate surrounding land, harming the environment and community.

Asbestos hazards – cleanup and disposal

- Buildings constructed before 1988 may contain asbestos cement (or 'AC') sheeting in walls, roofs, floor underlays, eaves, chimney flues or asbestos in vinyl floor tiles and backing to sheet linoleum. These AC materials are generally not a health risk unless they are cut, broken, drilled or crushed, where asbestos fibres may be released.
- During a bushfire, the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is likely to be low.
- After a bushfire, asbestos fibres may become airborne when excavation and cleanup work disturbs AC materials that may be present. It's most important that any broken or damaged AC materials (including in debris) be carefully removed (after pre wetting) and disposed of at a landfill site approved to accept asbestos. *Check with your local Council on suitable sites.* For advice on safe work practices see heading 'Further Information'.
- If large quantities of AC materials are present (on soil or attached to structures), it is recommended you engage a licensed asbestos removalist be engaged. These can be found in the yellow business pages under 'A' for Asbestos or by contacting WorkSafe on 9327 8777 or toll free number 1300 307 877. *Check with Local Council before demolishing buildings or structures.*
- If AC materials on your site are not burnt, and limited to only a few sheets or small number of fragments, wet them down and wrap securely in heavy duty

plastic sheeting or bags. All wrapped bundles need to be labelled with the words—CAUTION ASBESTOS and taken to an approved landfill site.

- Where a site is suspected of being heavily contaminated (asbestos in soil), advice should be sought from the Department of Health, Environmental Hazards Unit (08 9388 4965) and or Local Council Environmental Health Officer before attempting remediation.

Ash from burnt CCA-treated timber – cleanup and disposal

- “CCA” stands for copper chrome arsenate, a preservative that protects the timber from insects. CCA-treated timber is commonly used in pergolas, decking, cubby houses, cladding, posts, gates, fencing and landscaping. 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. Swallowing only a few grams can be harmful. Animals may also be poisoned after licking or swallowing the salty ash residue. Children, pets and other animals must be kept away from these ash areas until cleanup is completed.
- Ash should be double-bagged, sealed and taken directly to your local landfill. Damaged timber can also be disposed to landfill. Contact your local Council for advice on disposal or, the Department’s Environmental Hazards Unit (08 9388 4965) for information on the environmental effects of CCA -treated timber.

Further information

- For health advice on exposure to bushfire smoke or contact with material left after a bushfire, contact your local doctor.
- For further information on safe work practises for asbestos removal and disposal contact either the Department’s Environmental Hazards Unit (08 9388 4965) or your Local Council Environmental Health Officer.
- For further information on handling, transport and disposal of hazardous wastes, contact the Department of Environment, Controlled Wastes Section on 08 6467 5359 or your Council Environmental Health Officer.
- Refer to the Public Health website below for other fact sheets including: “Bushfire Smoke and “Using water from a rainwater tank after a bushfire’
http://www.public.health.wa.gov.au/2/988/2/bushfires_and_heat_events.pm
- The following link provides access to the Environmental Health Guide ‘Asbestos Cement Products in Your Home’
http://www.public.health.wa.gov.au/cproot/1364/2/Asbestos_in_the_Home_EH_Guide.pdf

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