

# Returning home after a bushfire

You must be cautious when returning to your property. Check with local emergency services that it is safe and that you have permission to return.

## Protective clothing

Put on protective clothing before entering your property:

- Sturdy footwear and heavy-duty gloves.
- Overalls with long sleeves and trousers (preferably disposable).
- Special face masks (called 'P2'). Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs and bandanas do not filter out fine ash or dusts or asbestos fibres.

## Be alert to all hazards

If you have a septic tank, it may have been weakened so do not drive or walk over it.

Minimise disturbance of dust and ash, which may contain hazardous materials.

Do not spread ash around, moisten it with water to minimise dust.

Be alert for hazardous materials such as LPG cylinders, chemicals (garden/farm), cleaning products, medicines and other burnt residues.

If you are using portable generators make sure they are in a well-ventilated area to avoid the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.

There may also be overhead hazards such as falling trees and tree limbs, and live power lines.

## Asbestos

Asbestos fibre exposure is only likely when people actively disturb ashes on properties built with asbestos-cement sheeting (built before 1990).

If asbestos may be present, you must get a licensed asbestos removalist to clean-up.

## Ash from treated timber

CCA-treated wood is commonly used in decking, fencing and landscaping. After a fire, the ash from this wood contains copper, chromium and arsenic.

This ash can be harmful; keep children and pets away. Seek advice from your local council on ash disposal.

## Rainwater tanks

The risk to human health is low from contaminated rainwater tanks in bushfire-affected areas. However, if fire-fighting foams have entered your tank, do not drink the water and do not give it to pets to drink.

If your rainwater tank is intact and the water has no abnormal look, smells or taste, it should be safe to use.

It is safest to boil untreated water that you plan to drink. If the rainwater looks, smells or tastes unusual, assume it is contaminated and don't drink it or use it for cooking, or preparing food.

Check your roof and guttering for ash, debris and animal carcasses. Remove them as soon as possible to avoid contaminants getting flushed into your tank. If your rainwater has been contaminated, drain the tank and allow it to refill with clean rainwater or fill it with water from a registered water carter.

For more information visit

[www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/water/drinking/ru-ral/tanks](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/water/drinking/ru-ral/tanks)

### **Food safety**

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.

Once cold or frozen food has warmed or thawed, it should be thrown out.

### **Cleaning your property**

Wear adequate protective clothing when handling debris outside.

### **Smoke and soot in the home**

Open all doors and windows to ventilate your home to help remove any smoke odour. Hard surfaces (furniture, walls and floors) can be washed with mild soap or detergent and water. Soft furniture and bedding can be aired outside.

### **Clothing**

Clothes that smell of smoke and clothes that had been left on the clothes line should be washed normally and dried outside. Rewashing of clothes ensures sensitive skin is protected from soot, particles and ash.

### **Smoke and your health**

Smoke may still be present in your area following a bushfire and may last for up to two weeks if there is no wind to clear the air.

### **Air pollution**

High smoke levels may cause or worsen breathing (respiratory) problems for some people.

Those most at risk are children, the elderly, smokers and people with pre-existing heart and lung diseases, including asthma. These people should avoid unnecessary travel to affected areas.

### **What you should do**

There are a number of steps you can take to protect your health:

- Follow your asthma action plan or your individual health plan.
- Avoid physical activity outdoors.
- Stay indoors with windows and doors closed where possible.
- Switch air conditioners to 'recycle' or 'recirculate'.
- When indoors, minimise other sources of air pollution such as tobacco smoke and wood stoves.
- If your home gets too smoky or hot for comfort, consider going somewhere with less smoke or with air conditioning.

### **Keeping track of the smoke**

Check the smoke particle levels in your area through the Environment Protection Authority's [real-time air quality data](#)

Air quality notifications are activated when smoke levels are high in an area for just one hour.

You can see when an [air quality notification](#) is active in your area and follow the recommended [precautions](#)

You can download the free [AirRater app](#) to keep track of air quality in your area.

### **Further information**

Contact Public Health Services for further advice about possible hazards, the health effects of smoke, current air quality and further factsheets.

Phone 1800 671 738, email [public.health@health.tas.gov.au](mailto:public.health@health.tas.gov.au) or visit [www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/alerts](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/alerts)