

PROPERTY HAZARDS FOLLOWING A BUSHFIRE

FACT SHEET

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

Hazardous household materials that may be present after a bushfire include asbestos, ash from burnt treated timbers (ie copper chrome arsenate or CCA), medicines, garden or farm chemicals, other household chemicals and cleaning products, damaged gas bottles, metal and other residues from burnt household appliances as well as ash and dusts.

Other hazards may include unsafe building structures, electrical hazards and missing fencing panels around swimming pools.

ACTION REQUIRED

Before returning to your property after a bushfire, consider the following precautions to protect your health:

- Do not enter your property until you are advised that it is safe to do so by emergency services, utilities companies or local council.
- Electrical hazards could exist such as live power lines that may be down or active solar panels.
- Buildings and other structures may be unstable to enter or walk over.
- Sewerage services may be disrupted causing health risks.
- Be aware that hot, smouldering coals and other potentially hazardous materials may be hidden under the rubble.
- Building rubble should not be buried as it may contain hazardous materials.
- Don't spread ash around your property, particularly if asbestos materials were used in your home or other structures, or CCA-treated timber was burnt.
- Moisten the ash with water to minimise dust and keep damp but do not use high pressure water sprays.

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

- Wear sturdy footwear and heavy duty work gloves to protect you from being cut by 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 throw them out with the site waste after use. Any non-disposable clothing should be cleaned/launched prior to reuse, including footwear.
- Do not use ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas. Face masks (called 'P2 masks') should be worn, as a minimum, to filter out fine particles including asbestos fibres.

ASBESTOS HAZARDS

Buildings built before 1987 may contain asbestos in the form of flat or corrugated sheets (fibro) used for walls, ceilings, roofing or in products such as pipes, electrical conduit and eaves.

A fire damaged asbestos building does not generate significant levels of asbestos fibres in the air unless it is disturbed. Although it is generally low risk to walk around or nearby asbestos damaged buildings, risks can increase when the material is disturbed.

Asbestos dust and fibres have the potential to present a health risk during and after a fire if not properly managed. Asbestos fibres may be present in the dust and ash and may pose a risk to those disturbing the dust and ash if inhaled while searching for their lost belongings.

The site will need to be continually damped down so as not to cause dust or be sprayed with polyvinyl acetate (PVA), or a similar sealant, to reduce the risk of the asbestos fibres becoming airborne (further reapplication requirements need to be monitored). This needs to continue until the site is cleaned up. Dust suppression should not be so great that it causes runoff into nearby drains and waterways.

Depending on the extent of the fire damage, the asbestos present can be classified as either friable or non-friable. Asbestos sheets that are severely damaged or reduced to ash are likely to be friable whereas asbestos that is intact or has suffered smoke damage is likely to be classified as non-friable.

The following precautionary measures are recommended during the clean up of fire damaged buildings containing asbestos:

- Confirmation from emergency services, utilities companies or local council that it is safe to enter your property.
- Warning signs erected to discourage people from entering the site.
- Avoid unnecessary entry, particularly entry by children.
- A site assessment to identify asbestos undertaken by a licensed asbestos assessor or occupational hygienist. In some cases, emergency services may undertake this role in an emergency situation.
- Asbestos debris should be kept wet or sprayed with PVA, or a similar sealant, to suppress the release of fibre until the material is safely removed. Do not use high pressure sprays.
- Access to the immediate site must be limited to those involved in the clean up. They are required to wear appropriate personal protective equipment (including a suitable type P2 respirator and disposable coveralls). All personal protective equipment must be disposed of as asbestos waste once the clean up is complete.
- Asbestos clean up and removal by a licensed asbestos removalist.
- Asbestos waste, including fibro, should be disposed of as soon as possible. The materials should be kept damp until they can be double wrapped in heavy duty (0.2mm) plastic, sealed with tape and labelled as asbestos waste.
- Asbestos waste can only be accepted at some landfill facilities. Contact your local council or the NSW Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) to find your nearest lawful waste facility and to learn more about the notification and packaging of asbestos.

For information about the safe handling and removal of asbestos, visit www.safework.nsw.gov.au

For information about transport and disposal of hazardous materials, visit www.epa.nsw.gov.au

For information about the health risks associated with asbestos, visit www.health.nsw.gov.au

For information about common areas where asbestos can be found in the home, visit www.asbestosawareness.com.au

Disclaimer

This publication may contain information about the regulation and enforcement of work health and safety in NSW. It may include some of your obligations under some of the legislation that SafeWork NSW administers. To ensure you comply with your legal obligations you must refer to the appropriate legislation.

Information on the latest laws can be checked by visiting the NSW legislation website www.legislation.nsw.gov.au

This publication does not represent a comprehensive statement of the law as it applies to particular problems or to individuals or as a substitute for legal advice. You should seek independent legal advice if you need assistance on the application of the law to your situation.

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