

Bushfires - staying safe during clean up

Fact sheet

Protecting you and your family's health must be a key priority following a bushfire. Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards in the remaining rubble, ash and debris. These hazards may include

- hazardous household materials (for example asbestos)
- ash from treated timbers (for example copper, chromium, arsenate or CCA)
- medicines, garden or farm chemicals, hot smouldering coals and ash, and electrical hazards (for example live power lines that may be down)
- gas cylinders (for example LPG)
- other dangerous items hidden under the debris buildings and other structures (for example septic tanks) that may be unstable to walk over or enter.

How to stay safe

Before starting any clean-up work in a fire-damaged building, check with your local emergency services or council to make sure it is safe to enter the building.

Wear appropriate clothing and equipment

If it is safe to enter, protect yourself by wearing appropriate clothing and equipment such as

- sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves to protect yourself from burns and sharp objects
- protective overalls with long sleeves and trousers
- special masks—called P1 or P2—to filter out fine particles, including asbestos fibres. These are available at most hardware stores.

Handling burnt materials and waste debris appropriately

- Dispose of building waste and debris in a safe manner in allocated disposal sites. Disposing of hazardous materials onsite or in nearby gullies may contaminate surrounding land.
- Take care when handling materials from buildings built before 1990 as they may contain asbestos. These materials are generally not a risk to health unless they are significantly disturbed. If asbestos is likely to be present on your property, a licensed asbestos removalist should be engaged to do the clean-up work.
- Don't spread ash around the property especially if asbestos materials or copper, chrome, arsenic (CCA)-treated timber was burnt during the bushfire as this may be harmful if ingested. Keep children and pets away from ash until the clean-up is completed.
- Minimise airborne ash by keeping the waste debris wet, do not use high pressure water sprays for this purpose.
- Throw away foods that have been fire damaged or heat affected, along with any perishable foods that have been left unrefrigerated.
- Ensure regular handwashing or showering after clean-up activities.

While cleaning up outside, make sure you wear sunscreen and a hat, and drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.

If tank water has been contaminated, seek advice from your local council or public health unit on remediation options. The water tank and collection surfaces may need to be emptied out and professionally cleaned.

What to do if your home smells of smoke

You can decrease the smell of smoke inside your home by

- opening your windows to allow sunlight and fresh air into your home
- washing all hard surfaces and cooking utensils with household detergent and water
- airing all soft furnishings outside—including mattresses and curtains—and re-washing any smoke-affected clothing and linen.

Further information

- Department of Health <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster>
- Food Safety <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/foodsafety>
- Queensland Fire and Emergency Services <https://www.qfes.qld.gov.au>
- National Centre for Farmer's Health <https://www.farmerhealth.org.au/page/bushfires/bushfire-aftermath-hazards>
- Queensland Government <http://deir.qld.gov.au/asbestos/publications.htm>
- Contact 13 QGOV (13 74 68) for your nearest public health unit.