

Returning home safely after a bushfire

Community Information

Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards including fallen objects, sharp objects, smouldering coals, damaged electrical wires, leaking gas and weakened walls.

Hazardous materials to be aware of after a fire include:

- asbestos
- ashes, especially from burnt treated timbers (such as copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA')
- dust
- garden or farm chemicals
- LP gas cylinders
- medicines
- metal and other residues from burnt household appliances
- other general chemicals (for example, cleaning products).

Check with your local emergency services that it is safe to return to your property. Where possible, try to avoid taking children onto fire-damaged properties. If you do, ensure they remain protected at all times.

Hazard Identification Notice

If your property has a "Hazardous Identification Notice" placed, please call Public Works Advisory on 1800 885 539 and they will be able to advise on what testing has been undertaken and what you may need to do. If you are insured, it is best to contact your insurer as early as possible for advice. They will generally have experts available for demolition and clean-up involving hazardous materials.

Protect yourself

Wear protective clothing including:

- sturdy footwear and heavy-duty work gloves
- disposable coveralls (with long sleeves and trousers)
- P2/N95 face masks.

You can purchase protective coveralls, gloves and face masks from your local hardware and work place supply stores.

When leaving the property, pack your gloves, coveralls and face mask into a garbage bag. Wash your hands after removing contaminated clothing and articles. Clean your shoes before wearing them again.

Handling waste

It is unsafe to spread or disturb ash around your property, particularly if CCA-treated timber was burnt. CCA is a preservative used to prevent insects, wood rot and wood fungus from damaged timber and timber structures. It is used to treat wood intended for outdoor use, such as telegraph poles and fence palings, in landscaping and in building structures. By default all wood outdoor wooden structures should be treated as CCA treated. If you unsure, assume it is treated.

If materials containing asbestos in your home or other structures are damaged, they can now be harmful.

Food

All foods that have been fire-damaged or affected by heat should be thrown out. This includes all perishable and non-perishable foods, for example, cans or packaged foods. Power outages can leave perishable foods, that may have been refrigerated, unsafe to eat.

Refer to the NSW Food Authority for more information: <http://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/>

Water tanks

Bushfires generate large amounts of smoke and ash, and your tank water could have become contaminated from debris and ash or dead animals. If the water tastes, looks or smells unusual do not drink it or give it to animals. Further information on managing rainwater tanks after bushfires is provided at: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/factsheets/Pages/fire-retardants.aspx>

Septic tanks

Your septic tank may have been weakened in the fire, so avoid driving or walking over it. If you suspect your septic tank has been physically damaged, contact a licensed plumber to have it assessed.

Items to bring

For safety reasons, try to limit the time spent at your property. However, if you will be there for an extended period, remember to bring with you:

- bottled drinking water
- food (perishable food should be kept cool in an esky or cooler bag)
- sunscreen
- a hat.

Take care of yourself

Returning to your property may be stressful and exhausting. It is important that you look after yourself and access mental health and counselling services if required.

Anyone experiencing persistent issues impacting their day-to-day lives are encouraged to talk to their General Practitioner or regular health care provider.

The Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP), which operates across rural and remote NSW, has coordinators in fire affected areas working directly with communities, providing on the ground support, connecting people to support and assistance and visiting evacuation centres daily.

To contact your local RAMHP Coordinator go to <https://www.ramhp.com.au> and type in your postcode.

To contact your local mental health service call the NSW Mental Health Line on **1800 011 511**. Alternatively you can call Lifeline on **131114**. For practical assistance call the Disaster Welfare Assistance Line **1800 018 444**.

Contact information

For further information on bushfire response and recovery services, contact NSW Department of Communities and Justice, Office of Emergency Management on **02 9212 9200** or visit <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au>