

Information for General Practitioners and other Health Professionals to advise people who have returned or intend to return to burnt premises

In general, nobody should return to a burnt building until cleared by the authorities to do so.

Specific advice about asbestos exposure:

The levels of exposure a person is likely to encounter around a burnt-out building will depend on the amount of asbestos in that building, and the condition of the asbestos (friable or not). It should be remembered that asbestos is only one of a range of possible hazards confronting people returning to burnt buildings (**see Attachment 1 for details**).

Environmental Health Subcommittee of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (enHealth) advice on asbestos exposure:

The risk of developing asbestos-related disease increases in proportion to the number of asbestos fibres a person breathes in during their life. This, in turn, depends on how many fibres are breathed in and how often. The risk of developing an asbestos-related disease increases when a larger number of fibres are breathed in. However, very occasional exposure to a larger number of asbestos fibres is unlikely to be harmful.

What should a health professional advise when consulted by a patient concerned about asbestos exposure after their return to a burnt building site?

If consulted by a patient concerned about possible asbestos exposure after attending a burnt building site, the health professional should reassure the patient that their exposure to asbestos fibres from this episode is unlikely to be harmful. In particular, there is no test or treatment that will not do more harm than good – X-rays are inappropriate and are likely to confer a greater risk to the patient than a one-off potential exposure to asbestos fibre in a burnt building.

Attachment 1.

The advice provided by the Western Australian Health Department is excellent:

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, electricity suppliers 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 or 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.