



Health concerns related to Victorian bushfires

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Issued to: Health professionals

Key messages

- A State of Disaster has been declared as significant bushfires are burning across Victoria and impacting communities across the state.
- The situation is rapidly changing so it's important to keep checking [VicEmergency](#) for updates.
- Air quality remains very poor to hazardous across East Gippsland and much of the north east of Victoria.
- Hazardous air quality may lead to:
 - **serious aggravation of health effects** in people over 65, children 14 years and younger, pregnant women and those with existing heart or lung conditions.
 - **serious increase** in respiratory and other effects in everyone else and many people might have symptoms like coughing or shortness of breath.
- Evacuations are underway, but everyone in an area heavily impacted by smoke, especially those in sensitive groups, should relocate where possible and safe to do so.
- If people are unable to leave, stay inside, close windows and doors and reduce activity. If you must go outside, use a P2 face mask if available. (See 'More Information' below for detailed advice on fitting and use of masks).
- If providing face masks, prioritise at-risk groups and health professionals working in heavily smoke-impacted areas and ensure instructions for correct fitting and use are provided.
- Rainwater tanks can be contaminated by debris, ash, dead animals, aerial fire retardants and water-bombing. Bottled water should be used if there are concerns about the quality of the drinking water.
- Remind patients to maintain good hygiene (using soap and water or antibacterial gel to wash hands) and practice food safety to avoid outbreaks of gastroenteritis and other diseases.
- Fires of this significance can cause extreme stress so encourage self-care and use of [support services](#) for community and emergency responders.

What is the issue?

Significant bushfires are burning across Victoria and impacting communities across the state. Health services will also be placed under pressure to provide care in areas impacted by smoke and fire. Bushfires can affect health in many ways. Protection of life from the fire risk is paramount.

In addition to smoke, other hazards include contaminated water and spoiled food which can increase the risk of gastroenteritis.

This situation is changing rapidly so health professionals are urged to remain vigilant and aware of announcements that may impact them and the care of their patients.

Who is at risk?

Bushfire smoke can affect anyone but particularly people over 65, children 14 years and younger, pregnant women and those with existing heart or lung conditions, including asthma. Risks from contaminated water and spoiled food will also have a greater impact on the elderly, young children and pregnant women.

Symptoms

Hazardous air quality can lead to:

- **Serious aggravation of health effects** in people over 65, children 14 years and younger, pregnant women and those with existing heart or lung conditions and,
- **Serious increase** in respiratory and other effects in everyone else and many people might have symptoms like coughing or shortness of breath.

Contaminated food and water can lead to nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal pain.

Recommendations

- Check VicEmergency to be aware of the current fire risk in your area and follow all advice provided.
- Stay in touch with your local Primary Health Network to be aware of any changes to health services in your area.
- Ensure those with asthma have asthma management plans, medication on hand and that they are activating plans based on symptoms and exposure.
- If issuing or recommending facemasks, also provide this information:
 - Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine particles from bushfire smoke and are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.
 - ‘P2’ or ‘N95’ masks filter bushfire smoke, providing greater protection against inhaling fine particles.
 - Anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition should seek medical advice before using them.
 - If the seal around the face and mouth is poor the mask is much less effective (men should be clean shaven to get a good seal). Masks are generally only effective for four hours or until they become moist.
 - Masks should not be a substitute for avoiding smoke exposure and can provide false reassurance, so ensure that anyone using a mask understand the need to follow all advice regarding smoke.
- Be alert to salmonella, campylobacter infections and other gastrointestinal pathogens. Viral pathogens such as norovirus will also be easily spread in areas where people are grouping together, such as shelters, or where access to good hygiene facilities is restricted.
- Encourage good hand hygiene and food safety practices for all patients in bushfire affected areas, particularly where disruption to power supplies make it difficult to store food at appropriate temperatures.
- Rainwater tanks can be contaminated by debris, ash, dead animals, aerial fire retardants and water-bombing. Bottled water should be used if there are concerns about the quality of the drinking water.
- Everyone in an area heavily impacted by smoke, especially those in sensitive groups, should follow advice related to evacuation or temporary relocation.

More information

Bushfire warnings, relief and recovery: www.emergency.vic.gov.au

AirWatch / Air quality monitoring: <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/EPAirWatch>

Smoke and your health: <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/for-community/environmental-information/air-quality/smoke/smoke-your-health>

Face masks (fitting instructions): <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/natural-disasters/bushfire-factsheets>

Private drinking water supplies: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/water/drinking-water-in-victoria>

Food safety during power outages: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/food-safety/food-safety-information-for-consumers/food-safety-during-power-outages>

Red Cross resources: <https://www.redcross.org.au/get-help/emergencies/resources-about-disasters>

Contacts

For information related to disease outbreaks: DHHS Communicable Disease Prevention and Control section on 1300 651 160 (24 hours).

For food safety issues: DHHS Food Safety Unit on 1300 364 352

For issues related to environmental public health: DHHS Environmental Health on 1300 761 874.

Air quality and smoke: Environment Protection Authority on 1300 372 842

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