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| Community information – Bushfires  |
| Information for communities impacted by fire – February 2024 |
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Smoke and your health

* Smoke from bushfires can reduce air quality.
* Exposure to bushfire smoke may affect your health – particularly if you have a pre-existing lung condition such as chronic bronchitis, emphysema or asthma.
* Fine particles in smoke can get deep into the lungs, worsening existing symptoms.
* Bushfire smoke may also cause itchy or burning eyes, throat irritation or a runny nose.
* If you have an existing medical condition such as asthma or chronic inflammatory lung disease, follow your action plan, and seek medical advice.
* If you experience wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing, call 000.

### How to protect your health from smoke

There are simple steps you can take to avoid smoke and protect your health.

* Check and follow any emergency warnings associated with threats from fires.
* If you are not under threat from a fire, avoid breathing in smoke by staying inside with the windows and doors closed until outdoor air quality is better.
* People with pre-existing heart or lung conditions, including asthma, should take their medication, follow their treatment plan and seek immediate medical advice if symptoms such as difficulty breathing or tightness in the chest occur.
* When there’s a break in the smoke, open your windows and doors to get rid of any smoke inside the house.
* Keep the air inside your home as clean as possible. You can use a split system, reverse cycle or refrigerated air conditioner. If it has a ‘fresh air’ function, make sure it is switched off. Do not use evaporative air conditioners if it’s smoky outside. Reduce activities that affect indoor air quality, like smoking cigarettes, burning candles or vacuuming.
* For more information, visit: <https://go.vic.gov.au/UGlmcF>

### Social media post

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| Copy | Tile |
| Smoke from bushfires can reduce air quality.  Exposure to bushfire smoke may affect your health – particularly if you have a pre-existing lung condition such as chronic bronchitis, emphysema or asthma.Fine particles in smoke can get deep into the lungs, worsening existing symptoms.Bushfire smoke may also cause itchy or burning eyes, throat irritation or a runny nose.If you have an existing medical condition such as asthma or chronic inflammatory lung disease, follow your action plan, and seek medical advice.If you experience wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing, call 000.Learn more: <https://go.vic.gov.au/UGlmcF> |  |

Bushfires and your drinking water

* A bushfire affected area is where water-bombing activities have occurred, and fire retardants, ash or debris have fallen directly onto properties.
* If you live in a bushfire affected area your private drinking water could be contaminated from debris, ash, dead animals, aerial fire retardants and water-bombing.
* If the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not drink, use for food preparation, brushing teeth or give to animals (pets or livestock). Use bottled water for drinking.
* There are things you can do to protect your private drinking water supply to ensure it is not affected by a bushfire event.
More information: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/after-a-fire-private-drinking-water-and-water-tank-safety>
* In non-bushfire affected areas, smoke tainted rainwater is unlikely to be a health concern. If you are concerned about the taste of your rainwater, use bottled water for drinking and continue to use your rainwater for other uses.

More information: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/bushfires-and-water-tanks>
Downloadable EPA factsheet: <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/about-epa/publications/1721-1>

# Power outages and food safety

The most important thing is to try to keep cold and frozen food cold. If food is still cold to touch (less than 5 °C), it is safe to use.

Before and after a power failure:

* Once cold or frozen food is no longer cold to touch, it can be kept and eaten for up to 4 hours and then it must be thrown away.
* If it is raw meat, it should be cooked and eaten.
* Eat hot food within 4 hours of it being heated or throw it away.
* If power is restored when frozen food is still frozen solid the food is safe.

During a power failure, the following actions will keep frozen and cold food frozen or chilled for longer:

* Move food from the fridge to the freezer.
* If available, put bagged ice under food packages and trays stored in freezers and fridges if power failure lasts more than 1 hour.
* Place an insulating blanket over cold or frozen food, where possible.
* Only open fridge and freezer doors when absolutely necessary, this will keep the food and air temperature colder for longer.

More information: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/food-safety/food-safety-during-power-outages#emergency-power-failures> and <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/emergencies-coping-without-gas-or-electricity>

Fire retardants and your health

Fire retardants are chemicals that slow the spread or intensity of a fire. They help firefighters on the ground and are sometimes dropped from aircraft. Fire retardants have been used in Victoria for the last thirty years. This fact sheet provides information about the effects of fire retardants, and how to protect your health around fire retardants.

More information: <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/about-epa/publications/1721-1>

# Ash – health risks and cleaning up

Smoke consists of particles that weren’t burnt completely. When the particles fall from the air, they collect on surfaces as soot and ash. This fact sheet contains information about the health risks of ash, and how to clean up ash after a fire has been extinguished. For information about ash and water tanks.

More information: <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/about-epa/publications/1721-1>

# Gardening equipment safety

Make sure your gardening equipment is safe.

* Wear safety goggles when you use line trimmers (such as whipper snippers) – they are a common cause of gardening-related eye injuries.
* Be aware of electrical leads (and make sure you don’t cut through them) when you use tools such as hedge trimmers, line trimmers and electric mowers.
* Don’t stand on the highest rungs of a ladder. There is a high risk of tipping. Falling from a ladder can cause serious injury, fractures, dislocations and soft tissue injuries.
* Wear earmuffs or earplugs when using noisy equipment such as lawnmowers, line trimmers and chainsaws.
* Use the right tool for the task and make sure it is the right sized tool for you.
* If a hot day, rest frequently and relax in the shade with a drink of water.
* Bend at the knees and don’t strain when lifting heavy objects. If the object is too heavy for you, seek help.

More information: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/gardening-safety>

# Mental health – Trauma – reaction and recovery

It is normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions following a distressing event. On most occasions though, these reactions subside as a part of the body’s natural healing and recovery process.

People can experience a range of physical, mental, emotional and behavioural reactions. For example,

* **Mental reactions** to trauma include: reduced concentration and memory, intrusive thoughts about the event, repeatedly playing parts of the event over in the mind, confusion or disorientation.
* **Emotional reactions** to trauma can include: fear, anxiety and [**panic**](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/panic-attack), shock – difficulty believing in what has happened, feeling detached and confused, feeling numb and detached, not wanting to connect with others or becoming withdrawn from those around you.
* **Behavioural reactions** to trauma can include: avoiding reminders of the event, inability to stop focusing on what occurred, getting immersed in recovery-related tasks, losing touch with normal daily routines, changed appetite, such as eating a lot more or a lot less, turning to substances such as alcohol, cigarettes and coffee, sleeping problems.
* Seek professional help if you don’t begin to return to normal after three or four weeks.

More information: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/trauma-reaction-and-recovery> and <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/talking-to-children-about-bushfires>

# Mental health – services and support

Sometimes it can be hard to know who to talk to if you are experiencing a mental health crisis. If you do not have family and friends living nearby or a strong local support network, it can be hard to get through difficult times on your own. Whether you are in a crisis or you just feel down and need to talk to someone, it is important to know that help is available at all hours of the day and night.

There are many free mental health hotlines and mental health online support services across Victoria, which provide crisis support, information, resources, counselling and therapy to people of all ages.

More information: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/counselling-online-and-phone-support-for-mental-illness>

# General bushfire emergency information

More information: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/campaigns/bushfire-emergency-information>

Downloadable factsheets: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/bushfires-and-public-health>

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| Factsheet title | English  | Translated resource  |
| After a fire: private drinking water and water tank safety  | [After a fire: private drinking water and water tank safety](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/migrated/files/collections/factsheets/a/after-a-fire-private-drinking-water-and-water-tank-safety.pdf) | [After a fire: private drinking water and water tank safety](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/resources/after-a-fire-private-drinking-water-and-water-tank-safety) |
| After a fire: returning home safely  | [After a fire: returning home safely](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/migrated/files/collections/factsheets/a/after-a-fire-returning-home-safely.pdf) | [After a fire: returning home safely](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/resources/after-a-fire-returning-home-safely) |
| After a fire: using your personal protective kit | [After a fire: using your personal protective kit](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/migrated/files/collections/factsheets/a/after-a-fire-using-your-personal-protective-kit.pdf) | [After a fire: using your personal protective kit](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/resources/after-a-fire-using-your-personal-protective-kit) |
| Power outages: using alternative fuel and elec. generation safely | [Power outages: using alternative fuel and elec. generation safely](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/power-outages-using-alternative-fuel-and-electricity-generation-safely.docx) | [Power outages: using alternative fuel and elec. generation safely](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/resources/power-outages-using-alternative-fuel-and-electricity-generation-safely) |
| Power outages: food safety after a power failure  | [Power outages: food safety after a power failure](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/power-outages-food-safety-after-a-power-failure.docx) | [Power outages: food safety after a power failure](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/resources/power-outages-food-safety-after-a-power-failure) |
| Private water sources in bushfire-affected areas | [Private water sources in bushfire-affected areas](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/migrated/files/collections/policies-and-guidelines/p/private-water-sources-in-bushfire-affected-areas-oct-2015.pdf) | n/a |
| Bushfire smoke and your health | [Bushfire smoke and your health](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/migrated/files/collections/translations/languages/english/english---bushfire-smoke-and-your-health---february-2021.pdf) | [Bushfire smoke and your health](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/resources/bushfire-smoke-and-your-health) |