

FACT SHEET: BUSHFIRES AND ASBESTOS

**THIS FACT SHEET GIVES YOU OVERVIEW INFORMATION.
FOR SPECIFIC INFORMATION FOR YOUR PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES
PLEASE CONSULT AUTHORITIES ON THE GROUND.**

*As many as 1 in 3 homes built prior to 1990
contain asbestos. Caution is needed when
returning to damaged properties.*

What happens if my home or buildings have been damaged in fires?

Staff from relevant state authorities conduct assessments of fire impacted properties to identify hazards you need to be aware of so you can take appropriate action to protect yourself.

Check with authorities on the ground in your community when you return.

The asbestos risk

Houses, sheds and other buildings damaged in a bushfire can leave potential health and safety hazards in the remaining debris and ash.

As many as 1 in 3 homes built prior to 1990 contain asbestos. This is especially true in coastal communities where many properties were constructed using fibro.

Asbestos is potentially present even in non-fibro homes, as it was used extensively in residential construction up until the late 1980s.

The most likely time that asbestos exposure could occur is during clean-up, when debris and materials are moved.



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Asbestos risk management during and after a fire

During the actual fire, very low concentrations of asbestos fibres may be released in the fire plume.

Avoiding the smoke plume is prudent. However, dilution of the plume by air drawn into the fire, and the use of water and foam to control the fire, will assist in limiting the concentration and spread of airborne fibres.

When exposed to fire and high temperatures, asbestos-containing products may suddenly crack and break, causing the product to degrade. In these circumstances, the products may 'explode' or spall into smaller pieces. Spalling of asbestos cement products can cause the release of fibres, and typically spalling only occurs in the early stages of the fire.

The most significant effect of spalling is the distribution of debris, often many meters from the original material and potentially beyond the boundary of the property or site.

After a fire has been extinguished, the debris may contain a variety of material including asbestos materials. This material can include unaffected asbestos-containing sheeting, and broken pieces of asbestos materials. The preliminary assessment of the site will focus on the need to prevent disturbance of asbestos-containing materials and the damaged structure as far as possible, and the identification of safe work procedures. Where asbestos is identified in an area, it is important that the area of contamination be determined, including an assessment of the amount and condition of the asbestos present.

The most important thing is not to disturb debris. Unless the fire debris is significantly disturbed, the risk to the public and neighbours from exposure to airborne asbestos fibres is low.

Please note that although the risk may be low (when debris is not disturbed), it is still present – and therefore taking all precautions and wearing protective equipment is recommended.

When debris and dust is disturbed the risk level rises, and is dependent on the situation.

More information around containment of dust and debris can be found here:

<https://www.asbestos.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/containment-disposal-asbestos-contaminated-dust-debris-from-fire.pdf?v=1551921495>

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Advice on the clean-up process – protecting your health & your family

When returning to your property after a bushfire, be aware of the following factors to protect yourself from potential asbestos exposure.

If asbestos is suspected, it is recommended you don't enter the property.

Most of the clean-up will be coordinated by authorities (see below).

The movement of debris is when you have the highest risk of asbestos fibre exposure. Make sure your property has been checked for asbestos before doing any clean-up.

If you are undertaking minor clean-up works yourself, please check with local authorities, including your council and EPA, about the waste you are moving, and ensure you are taking all recommended health precautions.

Even if you don't think asbestos is present, it is important to take precautions in case asbestos was in your home without your knowledge.

- wear a P2 face mask and protective clothing
- building rubble must not be buried as it may contain hazardous materials
- don't spread ash or debris around your property
- moisten ash with water to minimise dust but don't use high-pressure water sprays.

These precautions will also help you protect yourself from other potential hazards.

Who will do the asbestos clean-up?

- Clean-up will be coordinated by the relevant state governments.
- Don't undertake or arrange any works before contacting authorities on the ground and your insurance company. If you are not insured contact Public Works.
- It is not advisable to do any major clean-up works yourself – professional contractors will be arranged. This includes professional asbestos assessors and removalists.
- All waste should be transported and disposed of according to the legal requirements. There are strong requirements about how asbestos waste must be handled and transported, and where it can be taken. Professional contractors are aware of these requirements and can take hazard precautions.