



Fire-damaged asbestos

This fact sheet provides general information. For specific advice regarding your personal circumstances please consult authorities on the ground.

Homes built before 1990 are likely to contain asbestos materials, which become dangerous when damaged or disturbed. Caution is needed when returning to fire-damaged properties. Do not enter your property until you have been told that it is okay to do so by emergency services or your local council.

What is the risk of asbestos exposure during and after a fire?

Asbestos-containing materials can crack, break or shatter from the heat generated during a fire, releasing fibres into the environment. These materials often remain in debris and ash after the fire, posing the highest risk during clean-up.

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 high temperatures in a fire, moisture trapped in asbestos cement products may suddenly cause the material to explode or 'spall' into smaller pieces. Spalling can release fibres and contaminate a wide area beyond the fire zone, and typically only occurs in the early stages of the fire.

After a fire has been extinguished, the debris may contain a range of hazardous materials, including asbestos. A preliminary assessment of the site will focus on the need to prevent disturbing asbestos-containing materials and the damaged structure as far as possible. Where asbestos is identified, the extent of contamination will be assessed, including the amount and condition of the asbestos present, so that appropriate control measures can be chosen to minimise exposure during the clean-up process.

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Monitoring of air during and after fires show that asbestos fibre concentrations are relatively low. However, when fire debris and dust is disturbed, such as during clean-up or demolition of the fire-damaged building, the risk level rises. It is therefore important that these activities are carried out safely.

What happens immediately after the fire?

Following a fire, emergency services and local government environmental health services may take immediate measures to prevent disturbance of asbestos contamination.

Actions may include:

- erecting temporary fencing or barrier tape to prevent people from accessing affected areas
- installing asbestos warning signs to inform people of the hazard
- removing asbestos-containing debris from public footpaths and roads to prevent spread and minimise exposure
- keeping the affected area damp by using a fine mist water spray or a mixture of PVA glue or bonding agent to stop dust and airborne fibres (a dye is often added to easily see which areas have been treated).

These controls need to remain in place and be monitored until removal work can be completed.



Advice on the clean-up process

Most of the clean-up after a large bushfire will be coordinated by local and state government authorities.

Make sure your property has been checked for asbestos and follow the advice of your local authorities before entering your property to start any clean-up.

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In smaller scale fires, the property owner is responsible for arranging assessment and clean-up. If your property is insured, contact your insurer to check whether your policy covers the clean-up of asbestos contaminated debris. Even if you don't think asbestos is present, you should take the following precautions in case asbestos was in your home without your knowledge. These precautions will also help you protect yourself from other potential hazards:

- Wear a P2 face mask and protective clothing (heavy-duty gloves, disposable coveralls with long sleeves and trousers)
- Avoid spreading ash or debris around your property
- Dampen ash with water to minimise dust but don't use high-pressure water spray
- Do not bury building rubble as it may contain hazardous materials
- Remove your protective gear before you leave the property, place it in a garbage bag, seal it and dispose of it as asbestos waste
- Clean your shoes before wearing them again
- All asbestos waste must be wrapped and disposed of at a waste facility licensed to accept it.

Licensed asbestos removalists should be engaged for any major clean-up work. They have the training and equipment needed for the safe handling, removal and disposal of asbestos.

Further information

Information about asbestos and insurance can be found [here](#).

More information about asbestos contaminated dust and debris can be found [here](#).

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