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Latrobe Valley coal mine fires – cleaning up a smoke and ash affected home

health

Community information

February 2014

This information has been developed by the Department of Health in response to community questions and concerns about contact with ash and safe disposal of ash fall-out from smoke from the current brown coal fires in the Latrobe Valley.

Fires are currently affecting two of the three coal mines associated with the Hazelwood power station and the Yallourn power station. The fires have deposited large amounts of ash and smoke on indoor and outdoor surfaces in the Latrobe Valley region near the coal mine fires.

Coal ash and your health

What is coal ash?

Coal ash is the fine powdery material produced as a byproduct of the combustion of coal. When coal is burnt any particles that do not completely combust or are too large to become airborne are deposited on surfaces as ash.

The ash deposited by the Latrobe Valley coal mine fires is relatively non toxic and is similar to ash that might be found in your fireplace.

Ash particles have the potential to act as mild skin, eyes, nose or throat irritants and are too large to be breathed deeply into the lungs.

Are there health effects from the smoke and ash in my home?

- Ash on household surfaces is unlikely to cause short or long term health effects.
- If you experienced irritation to your skin, eyes, nose or throat, these effects should resolve quickly once the clean-up is completed. If not, seek medical advice.

Protecting yourself and your family during clean up

To reduce ingestion of ash or nuisance to the skin, eyes, nose or throat:

- Wear gloves, long sleeved shirts and long pants to avoid skin irritation in sensitive people.

- Well fitted dust masks may provide protection during clean up. In general, ash particles are larger than those found in smoke, therefore wearing a dust mask can significantly reduce (but not completely eliminate) the amount of particles inhaled.
- Practice good hygiene. Wash ash off your hands, face and neck as needed or before taking breaks.
- It is not recommended that babies or young children play in ash or dusty conditions.

Coal ash and smoke in the home

My home and belongings smell of smoke and are soiled by ash. What should I do?

Ventilate your home

On days of lower smoke density, open the house up to sunshine and fresh air to help remove the odour.

Remove ash from inside and outside surfaces

- Gently sweep indoor and outdoor hard surfaces followed by wet mopping.
- Do not use leaf blowers or take other actions that will liberate ash into the air.
- The use of typical household vacuum cleaners is not recommended. Such vacuum cleaners do not filter out small particles, and will resuspend collected ash dust into the air via the exhaust which may irritate the eyes, nose and throat. Use a HEPA filter vacuum if available. Collected ash may be disposed of in garbage bins. Store ash in plastic bags or other containers to prevent it from being redistributed. Avoid washing ash down storm water drains whenever possible.

Wash hard surfaces (furniture, walls and floors)

- Wash indoor surfaces with mild soap or detergent and water.
- For persistent smoke, soot and ash, wear rubber gloves and wash with the following: 4-6 teaspoons of washing powder and 1 cup of household chlorine bleach added to 4 litres of water. Remember to

always follow the safety directions on the bleach container.

- Cooking utensils can be washed with detergent and hot water and polished with a suitable polishing agent to remove discolouration.

Wash soft furnishings (upholstered furniture and bedding)

Air soft furnishings outside in the sunshine and wind. Mattresses may be able to be cleaned by a specialist mattress repairer. It is very difficult to get the smell of smoke out of feather pillows or foam.

Clothing

- Air clothing outside in the sunshine and wind.
- Wash affected clothing normally.
- Persistent stains and smoke odour can be sometimes washed from clothing using 4-6 teaspoons of washing powder and 1 cup of household chlorine bleach added to 4 litres of water. After washing, rinse clothes with clean water and dry well. Remember to wear gloves and follow the safety directions on the bleach container. **Care should be taken as this mix will bleach clothes.**

What about clothes left on the clothes line?

Clothes should be rewashed to ensure protection of sensitive skin (for examples babies) from possible irritants.

What about my conditioner / evaporative cooling system?

If you are concerned about ash in your air conditioner or evaporative cooling system at home, please refer to your manufacturer's instructions on how to clean it. Otherwise, please contact a professional to service and clean the system.

Gardens and plants

Can ash from the coal mine fire affect my garden vegetation?

Ash from the coal mine fires is not expected to have any detrimental effects on your garden. However, deep ash levels may smother vegetation and hot ash may burn vegetation affecting plant growth and survival.

Can I eat my garden vegetables, fruit or herbs?

Always use common sense when deciding whether or not food is safe to eat. Vegetables, fruit or herbs should be washed in water prior to eating.

If you do not wish to eat the produce in your garden, affected vegetation can be washed and composted.

Rain water tanks

I use my rainwater tank as a drinking water supply. Will my tank water be contaminated?

General advice from the Department of Health is that if your tank water supply tastes, looks or smells unusual do not use it for drinking, bathing or for pets.

Contact your local council Environmental Health Officer or the Department of Health for additional advice.

Further information

Smoke, ash and your health and safety

If you see smoke haze, check for fire warnings in your area:

- Listen to your local radio station for updates
- Visit the Country Fire Authority Victoria website at: www.cfa.vic.gov.au/
- Call the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667. TTY users should use the National Relay Service (phone 1800 555 677) then ask for 1800 240 667
- If you or anyone in your family is experiencing symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure, seek medical advice or call NURSEON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.
- Anyone experiencing difficulty breathing or chest pain should seek urgent medical assistance phone 000.

EPA Victoria: 1300 372 842 (24 hrs)

www.epa.vic.gov.au

Department of Health: 1300 761 874 (business hrs)

www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/bushfires.htm

Water tanks: www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/water

Chief Health Officer:

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/chiefhealthofficer/>

Asthma Foundation: 1800 278 462

www.asthma.org.au

Latrobe City Council: 1300 367 700

<http://www.latrobe.vic.gov.au/Home>

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