

20/3/14

## Hazelwood open cut mine fire Q & A – Health – 20/03/14

### UPDATE – RECOVERY ADVICE

#### **Q: What is the role of the Department of Health in this incident?**

**A:** The Department of Health is working with local government, the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and the Country Fire Authority to support the Morwell community impacted by Hazelwood open cut mine fire.

The EPA will continue to monitor air quality in Morwell and other areas in the Latrobe Valley region. Data from this monitoring is being provided to the Department to identify any possible health impacts

The Community Assessment Centre in Morwell, established by the Department to ensure the community has access to accurate health advice and basic health assessments will remain open until at least 30 March. We will also continue working with local health care providers to ensure they are supported during this time of transition. In addition, the department will update any health advice required by the community.

Go to the Department of Health website for health information about the Hazelwood open cut mine fire at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood>

### RECOVERY

#### **Q: When will I be able to return to my home?**

**A:** The recommendation to relocate temporarily away from the smoke has been lifted by the Chief Health Officer. This advice is based on ongoing advice from EPA on air quality as well as from the Fire Services Commissioner about the level of fire suppression.

No serious health effects have been seen from the smoke however if you have concerns about your health, visit the Community Health Assessment Centre, call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24 or see your doctor.

Anyone experiencing severe difficulty breathing or chest pain should seek urgent medical assistance – call 000.

#### **For general health information about this incident:**

[www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood)

#### **Q: Where can I get help and information about recovery?**

**A:** The Latrobe City Council is leading the recovery effort with support from the state Government, in particular, the Department of Human Services. Community engagement will continue to provide ongoing information and support to residents and businesses.

Contact the Council for more information on 1800 017 777.

## **CLEANING UP**

### **Q: How can I clean the smoke and ash from my home?**

**A:** In addition to the support provided by Latrobe City Council, the Department of Health has general advice on the website about cleaning up a smoke-affected home at [www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood)

### **Q: Can I use a high pressure hose on properties containing asbestos?**

**A:** No. High pressure hoses **must not** be used to clean materials containing asbestos, as this activity can damage the material and release asbestos fibres. If residents/professional cleaners are unsure if a house contains asbestos materials, it is better to treat any suspect material as though it contains asbestos. Any material installed before 1990 should be assumed to contain asbestos.

For more information on asbestos: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/hazards-asbestos.htm>

If you are hosing down outside areas such as your driveway, pavers or your home, we recommend directing the run-off towards your lawn.

### **Q: What is in the ash – will it damage my health?**

**A:** When coal is burnt, any particles that don't completely burn and are too large to stay in the air, fall as ash. The materials in ash from this fire are similar to materials in the soil in your garden and the ash you'd find in a fireplace so it can be safely dug into the garden or added to your compost bin.

Victoria's brown coal contains fewer impurities than other types of coal such as black coal found interstate and overseas.

The ash particles are too large to be breathed deeply into the lungs so it's unlikely to cause either short or long term health effects.

If you have an existing lung condition, such as asthma, breathing in ash during clean up could make that condition worse, so it's best to get help to clean. If you're cleaning in an enclosed area or dealing with large quantities of ash, a facemask may help, provided it is fitted and worn correctly.

Babies and young children should not play in ash or dusty conditions, to prevent irritation to the skin, eyes and throat or unnecessary ingestion of ash. Good hygiene includes the washing of toys, and washing of the child's hands and face before eating or sleeping.

See the 'Cleaning up after the Fires' factsheet at [www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood)

### **Q: Should I wear a face mask? Will it protect me from particles in the ash?**

**A:** Face masks called P2 masks can help to filter out fine particles in ash. To ensure the mask provides the best possible protection it must be fitted and worn properly. This will be difficult for children, so keep them away from the ash while you clean up if possible.

Facemasks are available at the Community Health Assessment Centre and several other locations. They will also provide information on how to fit and wear them properly. This

question and answer sheet is also available on the Department of Health website at [www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood) .

**Q. Can air purifiers improve indoor air quality?**

A: The use of air purifiers to improve indoor air quality is not recommended. This is because they don't remove all hazards associated with air pollution or particles.

Some air cleaners may help reduce, but not remove indoor air pollution and provide relief from allergens and odours. However they are ineffective in a house that is not properly sealed as outside contaminants are constantly replenished.

**Q. What long-term health effects are expected from smoke from these fires?**

A: Long-term health effects that occur from air pollution usually occur after several years or a lifetime of exposure. The smoke from these fires has affected local air quality for a number of weeks, rather than years, therefore long-term health effects are not expected.

The EPA will continue to monitor air quality in Morwell and other areas in the Latrobe Valley region throughout the duration of the fires. Check the EPA website for air quality updates at [www.epa.vic.gov.au](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au)

The Department of Health is providing, and updating health advice for the community based on this information. Go to the Department of Health website for updates and health information about smoke, carbon monoxide in smoke and ash-fallout at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood>

**HEALTH ASSESSMENTS AND SUPPORT**

**Q: Are there other medical services people can access other than their General Practitioner or the hospital?**

A: The Community Health Assessment Centre will remain open until at least 30 March. It will remain at the Ambulance Victoria Gippsland Regional office at 2 Saskia Way in Morwell, adjacent to the Mid Valley Shopping Centre.

The centre is offering basic primary health assessments such as blood pressure, heart rate, temperature and basic respiratory checks such as chest sounds and respiratory rate.

From Saturday 22 March, it will operate from 10am to 6pm each day. Should anyone need medical care, they will be referred to their own doctor or to Latrobe Regional Hospital.