

Cleaning up after the Hazelwood open cut mine fires

health

Community information

20 March 2014

Fires burning in the Hazelwood open cut mine put smoke and ash over Morwell and other areas of the Latrobe Valley. Information and support is available to help those people living and working in and around Morwell.

What is coal ash?

When coal is burnt, any materials 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.

Will ash damage my health?

Ash may irritate the skin, eyes, nose and throat. Ash particles are too big to be breathed deep into the lungs so are unlikely to cause either short or long term health effects.

If you have an existing lung condition, such as asthma, breathing in dust during cleaning-up could make that condition worse, so it's best to get help to clean and avoid the ash.

How do I get rid of ash?

Before you start ...

Wear gloves, long sleeved shirts and long pants to stop ash sticking to your skin. Wear glasses or goggles to stop ash getting into your eyes.

If there is a lot of ash, wear a facemask. Free facemasks are available from Latrobe City Council or the Health Assessment Centre (at 2 Saskia Way, Morwell).

Practice good hygiene. Wash ash off your hands, face and neck as needed. Keep babies and young children out of the ash.

Open up your home to fresh air and sunlight.

Ash on hard surfaces

Gently wipe or wash hard surfaces with a damp cloth and mild soap or detergent. Make sure children's toys and play areas are clean.

For large areas such as floors, **gently** sweep, then follow with wet mopping.

Wash items such as cooking utensils and ornaments in detergent and hot water.

Ash on soft furnishings (such as bedding, lounges)

Air furnishings outside in the sun where possible. Mattresses can be professionally cleaned, but once you've washed the bedding, this may not be needed.

Clothing can be washed according to manufacturer's instructions and if you've had clothes on the line outside, rewashing should remove any smoky smell or ash.

What about my carpets?

Avoid using a vacuum cleaner unless it has a special filter (called a 'HEPA' filter) as you'll just be blowing dust and ash back into the air.

Contact Latrobe City Council for more information on 1800 017 777.

What about my air-conditioning system?

Check your manufacturer's instructions before cleaning either air-conditioning or evaporative cooling systems. This equipment may need to be professionally serviced.

Cleaning outdoors

Sweep gently then wash areas if possible. Avoid using leaf blowers as they just put the ash back into the air.

Can I use a high pressure hose?

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 does. Any material installed before 1990 should be assumed to contain asbestos. For more information:

www.asbestos.vic.gov.au

Can I still eat the food from my garden?

Ash on vegetables, herbs and fruit won't damage them unless the cover has been thick enough to smother them. Always wash food from your garden before eating. If you don't like the look of the food it can be put into the compost bin or thrown away in the household garbage.

Rain water tanks

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.

The town water supply is safe to use for drinking and all other domestic uses.

Where can I put the ash?

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

Ash can be safely dug into your garden or added to compost. Ash can also be placed in a plastic bag or other container and then put in the usual household garbage bin.

Health advice

If you have concerns about your health related to smoke or ash from the fire, visit the Health Assessment Centre at 2 Saskia Way Morwell, call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24 or see your doctor.

Anyone experiencing difficulty breathing or chest pain should seek urgent medical assistance by calling 000.

Department of Health: 1300 761 874 (business hours)

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

Asthma Foundation: 1800 278 462 www.asthma.org.au

Further information

Latrobe City Council: 1800 017 777.

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

Vic Emergency: www.emergency.vic.gov.au

EPA Victoria: 1300 372 842 (24 hrs)
www.epa.vic.gov.au

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