

Cleaning workplaces affected by the Hazelwood coal mine fire

WorkSafe is advising employers and employees who undertake any cleaning as a result of the Hazelwood coal mine fires to take into account the following health and safety issues.

This is not an exhaustive list of hazards but is designed to provide guidance on some of the more common risks that may be faced. Hazards and risks will have to be identified and assessed respectively for each workplace and appropriate controls implemented.

Members of the public who wish to clean their homes should read the factsheet 'Cleaning up after the fire' prepared by the Department of Health at health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood.

WorkSafe strongly encourages people who wish to clean their homes to also consider the following advice for their own health and safety.

Minimise the dust

The ash deposited as a result of the coal fire is similar to materials in garden soil but it may be a mild irritant to the eyes, nose and throat. Try to prevent or minimise exposure to the dust as far as reasonably practicable to avoid any further unnecessary exposure. Use cleaning methods that minimise dust/ash becoming airborne such as:

- Spray or wet surfaces before wiping, mopping or sweeping (indoors or outdoors).
- Use vacuum cleaners fitted with HEPA filters as these will capture very fine particles that other vacuum cleaners won't
- Hose down surfaces such as pathways, driveways and grassy areas. Where possible, minimise hosing into stormwater by hosing into grassed areas or damp down and then sweep up.
- Steam cleaning

Where dust is generated during the cleaning process, suitable respirators such as a P1 or P2 dust mask should be worn to minimise exposure. People with sensitive skin should wear gloves, long sleeved shirts and long pants.

Working at heights

Falls from heights are a major source of workplace injuries so avoid getting onto roofs if possible. If appropriate, consider allowing the rain to clean the roof. However, if cleaning is necessary, it may be possible to clean the roof by hosing it down from ground level or by using cleaning aid extensions that enable the work to be conducted on the ground. The use of work platforms and harness to prevent fall injury are options that might also be considered. If using a ladder:

- Make sure the ladder is sufficiently sturdy
- Use the ladder for the purpose it was designed for
- Ensure the ladder is stable and secure
- Do not use a ladder on soggy/soft ground.
- Ensure surfaces are stable.
- Be aware of anyone working below and the potential for things to fall on them.

View [further information on working at heights](#)

Asbestos

It is prohibited to clean any materials which contain asbestos (such as walls, eaves, roofs etc.) with high pressure water. Use of high pressure water equipment to clean roofing or sheets which contain asbestos will break down the material and spread asbestos contamination. Information for homeowners and businesses is available at asbestos.vic.gov.au.

Electrical

Electrocution is a common source of injury or death.

- Water or wet cleaning methods must not be used around electrical equipment such as switch boxes and power boards.
- Any electrical plant/tools used for cleaning purposes must be in good working order and maintained.
- Beware of all electrical wiring when working in confined areas (such as roofs), that may not have been inspected for a considerable period of time.

View further information on [preventing electrical shock from power tools and electrical leads](#).

Cleaning water tanks

Under certain circumstances, entering a tank to clean it may present a risk. Where possible, tanks should be cleaned from the outside. For example, tanks can be cleaned by filling and flushing them several times, by circulating the contents through a high capacity filter or by using high pressure water equipment from outside the tank.

If a tank must be entered because it cannot be adequately cleaned any other way, the tank must first be flushed out and thoroughly ventilated. It is recommended that physical methods of cleaning such as scrubbing are used rather than chemical ones (unless only a mild household detergent is required).

Fuel-driven pumps (diesel, petrol etc.) must not be taken into a tank due to the generation of carbon monoxide which can cause death in a confined space.

Information is also available from the [department of health](#) on water tanks.

Air conditioning, heating and ventilation systems

Check with the manufacturer on what cleaning or maintenance may be required as a result of exposure to high levels of dust and ash. It is likely that filters will need to be cleaned or replaced to restore proper operating efficiency. Consider if ducting should also be cleaned.

Disposal of waste

Ash and dust collected in the clean-up can be disposed as general waste. If possible, waste ash or dust should be moistened or bagged to reduce dust. As ash contains trace elements which can boost soil quality, workplaces with gardens may prefer to dig the ash into the soil or add it to compost.

Duty of care

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Remember, if you are an employer you must, so far as reasonably practicable, provide and maintain a safe working environment for employees and independent contractors. You should provide adequate information, instruction, training or supervision during any clean-up work and ensure members of the public are not put at risk. Ongoing communication about safety in the workplace is the key. Have a conversation about the conditions and encourage staff to speak up if they identify any risks to health and safety.

