

Fact sheet: ash



Environment
Protection
Authority Victoria



Publication 1724 December 2018

Fact sheet

Overview

Smoke consists of particles that weren't burnt completely. When the particles fall from the air, they collect on surfaces as soot and ash. Smoke can linger after a fire, which means that soot and ash can continue to settle around your home and garden for several days after the fire has been extinguished.

What are the health risks of ash?

Smoke is a mixture of particles, water vapour and gases. Fine particles, called PM_{2.5}, are the biggest health concern because they can be breathed into your lungs. These are the particles that can be present in ash and soot.

Ash and soot can be irritating to the lungs and the skin. Breathing these fine particles deeply into the lungs can cause breathing problems and worsen pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma and heart disease.

Signs of short-term irritation such as itchy eyes, skin irritations, sore throat, runny nose and coughing usually clear up in healthy adults once you're away from the smoke. If these symptoms don't improve quickly once you're away from the smoke, contact NURSE-ON-CALL (1300 60 60 24) or seek medical advice

What can I do?

- Take medications if you have pre-existing medical conditions, such as asthma or heart disease.
- Wash ash off your hands, face and neck.
- If ash gets in your eyes, gently wash them out with clean water.
- Practise good hygiene, and wipe down surfaces with soap and water.
- Remove footwear before entering your home, to avoid walking ash inside.

Further information

Contact EPA on
1300 372 842
(1300 EPA VIC)
or epa.vic.gov.au

- Incident information and updates:
emergency.vic.gov.au
- Up-to-date air quality information:
epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch
- Information about the impacts of smoke:
epa.vic.gov.au/smoke
- NURSE-ON-CALL: 1300 60 60 24
- Emergency information:
epa.vic.gov.au/our-work/emergency-information
- For information about water tanks, see *Ash and water tanks* (EPA publication 1725)



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How does ash get inside my home?

Even though you may have closed your doors and windows and turned off any cooling or heating systems, ash can still come into the home in other ways, such as through:

- holes in the ceiling
- cornices that are cracked or missing with visible gaps into the roof space
- fans and vent points that are not sealed
- gaps in ceiling roses
- gaps in connections between flues and the ceiling openings around doors and windows.

Cleaning up

Houses, sheds and gardens can be affected. If your home has been affected by smoke, make sure you take steps to clean up any ash and protect your health and safety.

When cleaning up ash and soot, make sure you:

- wear a dust mask, gloves, a long-sleeved shirt and long pants to avoid skin contact
- wash any ash off your skin as soon as possible
- prevent children, particularly young children, playing near the ash until the area has been cleaned up
- avoid getting ash in the air as much as possible – don't use leaf blowers or anything that will push the ash into the air
- gently sweep hard surfaces before wet mopping
- use a damp cloth or wet mop on lightly dusted areas.

Cleaning up ash inside your home

- Wash indoor surfaces with water. If a surface film is visible, wash with soap and water.
- Wash cooking utensils with detergent and hot water or run them through the dishwasher.
- Wash soft furnishings (upholstered furniture, curtains, carpets/rugs, cushions and bedding) or vacuum using a vacuum with a HEPA filter, so particles don't blow back into your house.

- Wash clothes left exposed in the house (such as on the floor or on the clothes line).
- Wash children's toys with soap and water.
- Have heating, ventilating and air-conditioning units and all ductwork professionally cleaned and replace filters, to remove soot, ash and smoke residue.

Cleaning up ash outside your home

- Wash ash and debris into landscaped areas wherever practical.
- Pressure wash or hose down all exterior surfaces including the roof, walls, driveways and paths, decks, windows and flyscreens.
- Clean windows with soap and water or window cleaner.
- If you have a chimney, you may want to get a professional to clean it for you.
- Ash and soot on the ground and in your landscaping will continue to generate airborne particles when the wind blows, so water it down regularly.
- Take your car to a car wash or wash it over a vegetated area such as your lawn.

Can I eat my garden vegetables?

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.

Can I use the water out of my water tank?

If the water from your water tank tastes, smells or looks unusual, do not use it for drinking, bathing or for pets. The town water supply is safe to use for drinking, and all other domestic uses.

Further information on rainwater tanks is available in the *Ash and water tanks* fact sheet (EPA publication 1725).