

Bushfires and water tanks

Summary

- If the water in your tank looks, tastes or smells unusual, assume it is contaminated.
 - Water can be disinfected by bringing it to a rolling boil or by adding accurate amounts of chlorine.
 - If your tank needs cleaning, it is recommended that you contact a specialist contractor, as working in a confined space is dangerous.
 - Water that is not suitable to drink may be used to fight fires or water the garden.
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If you live in a bushfire-affected area, you should be aware that your private water source could become contaminated from debris, ash, fire retardants or dead animals. Also, you should not source water from a creek that has been affected by bushfire as the water may be contaminated.

Water drawn from deep bores or wells should still be safe to use. If you suspect contamination, use an alternative water supply for drinking and food preparation. Contact your local council for a list of water carting contractors.

Preventing water tank contamination

The most effective way to prevent contamination of your water tank is to make sure it is properly sealed and to disconnect the downpipes to the tank as soon as there is a bushfire risk. Do not reconnect the downpipes until the roof has been cleaned after the bushfire, either manually or after a flush of rain.

Detecting tank water contamination

If your water looks, smells or tastes unusual, then it is likely to be contaminated. Do not use the water for drinking or food preparation, and do not give it to animals.

Water that is not suitable for drinking can still be used on the garden. Water testing is not necessary, as contamination is easily identified by a change in taste, smell or clarity.

Debris or dead animals on your roof or in the gutters should be removed. Use gloves and place in a plastic bag for disposal. Your tank water should be disinfected before re-using.

Disinfecting tank water

Water can be disinfected by bringing it to a rolling boil or by adding chlorine. For every 1,000 litres of water in the tank, you can safely add either:

- Approximately 125 ml or 125 g of 4 per cent household bleach. Avoid using bleaches that contain detergents or other chemicals, such as perfumes
- Approximately 40 ml or 40 g of 12.5 per cent chlorine liquid swimming pool chlorine or dairy factory chlorine
- Approximately 8 ml or 8 g of 65 per cent granular 'swimming pool' chlorine.

After chlorinating, you should wait at least 24 hours before using the water to allow for harmful microorganisms to be treated.

When to resume using your rainwater tank for drinking

If the water in your tank has not been contaminated, the water should be safe to use. However, do not reconnect your downpipes until your roof has been cleaned.

Only clean the ash and debris from your roof and gutters when it is safe to do so.

Do not use the water for drinking if it looks, smells or tastes unusual. The water and tank should be disinfected prior to use.

It should not be necessary to clean your tank after a fire unless it is grossly polluted or smells and tastes unusual as a result of aerial fire retardants.

Alternatively, you can arrange for your tank to be professionally cleaned. Where cleaning involves entering a tank, consider employing a professional tank cleaner. Tanks are confined spaces and can be dangerous to work in. Refer to your local business directory for water tank cleaners.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health, Victoria Tel. 1300 761 874

Things to remember

- If the water in your tank looks, tastes or smells unusual, assume it is contaminated.
- Water can be disinfected by bringing it to a rolling boil or by adding accurate amounts of chlorine.
- If your tank needs cleaning, it is recommended that you contact a specialist contractor, as working in a confined space is dangerous.
- Water that is not suitable to drink may be used to fight fires or water the garden.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Department of Health and Human Services - Emergency Management

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Community Resource Material

as at 5/1/16

- **Hard copies of these docs are available :**
 - in a white folder "Emergency Management Community Resources" (Brenda & Cassie)
- **Electronic copies of these docs are available:**
 - on EM Folder USB sticks

Bushfire Resources		
Resource	Source	Web location
Asbestos – A guide for householders and the general public	Enhealth	http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/asbestos-toc/\$FILE/asbestos-feb13.pdf
Asbestos and your health	Better Health Channel	https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/asbestos-and-your-health?viewAsPdf=true
Asbestos removal services	WorkSafe	http://www1.worksafe.vic.gov.au/vwa/serviceproviderdirec.nsf/search?openform&List=Asbestos+-+Licensed+Removalists&ListType=Sub&Cat=Sub+All+types+of+Asbestos+containing+material+(friable+&+non-friable) (Click Search for the directory to appear)
Bushfire aftermath – safety tips	Better Health Channel	https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/bushfire-aftermath-safety-tips?viewAsPdf=true
Bushfire smoke	Better Health Channel	https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/bushfire-smoke
Bushfire smoke and your health	Health.vic	https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/natural-disasters/bushfire-factsheets
Bushfires and water tanks	Better Health Channel	https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/bushfires-and-water-tanks?viewAsPdf=true
Cleaning up a smoke-affected home	Health.vic	https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/factsheets/Cleaning%20up%20a%20smoke%20affected%20home
Copper chrome arsenic (CCA) treated timber	Better Health Channel	https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/copper-chrome-arsenic-cca-treated-timber?viewAsPdf=true

Emergencies – coping without gas or electricity	Better Health Channel	https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/bushfire-aftermath-safety-tips?viewAsPdf=true
Fire retardants and health	Health.vic	https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/factsheets/Fire%20retardants%20and%20health
Nurse on Call	F Drive	F:\Public_health\Emergency Management\NURSE ON CALL and temp Dr v2.doc
Please be safe when returning to your property	Health.vic	https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/factsheets/Please%20be%20safe%20when%20returning%20to%20your%20property
Private water sources in bushfire-affected areas	Health.vic	https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/natural-disasters/bushfire-factsheets
Smoky Outside? Protect Your Health	Health.vic	https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/natural-disasters/bushfire-factsheets
Smoky Outside? Stay Inside	Health.vic	https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/natural-disasters/bushfire-factsheets