

## What Happens Now That the Fire Is Out?

This is an industry published guidance document designed to assist property owners returning to fire affected properties.

The impact from the recent fires in Australia have had devastating consequences for many people, businesses, properties and animals.

To help property and business owners who are returning to fire and smoke damaged properties, RIA (Restoration Industry Association) has developed this guide which contains important advice to help you through this difficult time.

It's important that you understand some of the hazards of re-entering an area affected by bushfire and steps you can take through the process of rebuilding your property or business and getting back to normal life.

Throughout this document there are organisations and people referenced who will help you through the process.



## What to Do Now

### If You Are Insured

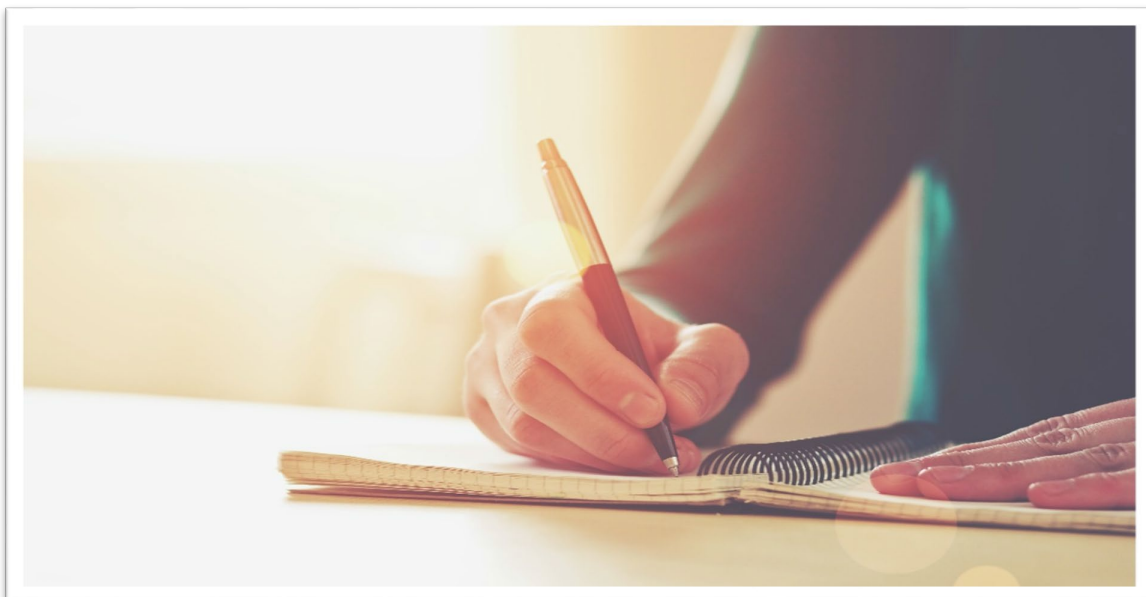
*Call your insurance company, agent or broker as soon as possible.*

Find out what actions you need to take and information you need to provide. Don't throw away damaged items in case they need to be assessed.

Talk to your insurance company before doing any cleaning or arranging any repairs. Most insurers have a range of specialists who can do these tasks for you. It is not uncommon for an insurance company to investigate a claim. Try to remember events leading up to the fire. Make a note of them and be prepared to answer questions. Check with your insurance company to see if they will advance you money for essentials and accommodation.

Consider getting a notebook to record important information such as name and contact details of insurance representatives and contractors, time and dates of appointments and other important information to assist with your claim. It's easy to forget things at such a stressful time and writing them down in one place will help you remember.

Save all receipts.



## If You Are a Tenant

Contact your real estate agent or landlord as soon as possible. If your contents are insured, contact your insurance company immediately.

*Information for tenants affected by natural disasters:*

- [New South Wales](#)
- [Victoria](#)
- [South Australia](#)
- [Queensland](#)
- [Tasmania](#)
- [Western Australia](#)
- [Australian Capital Territory](#)
- [Northern Territory](#)

## Building & Site Safety

It's important to be aware of the many potentially dangerous hazards faced when returning to a fire and/or smoke-damaged property.

Firstly, check with your local emergency services that it is safe to return to your property after a bushfire.

Be aware that properties, sheds and other buildings may not be structurally sound and entering the building could be dangerous. Walls, roofs and ceilings can give way without warning and floors or stairs may not be as stable as they appear. Structural damage may not be readily evident.

You should only go into your property if it has been declared safe. A structural engineer may be required to ensure your property is structurally safe before you go inside. Your insurance company may contact a building inspector for you, depending on your level of insurance, or the local government's building inspector may be able to help.

When moving and looking through your property, be aware of rubble and falling debris that could cause injury. If materials containing asbestos have been damaged on your property, you should seek professional advice before entering.

## Some Things to Check and Be Aware Of:

- Wiring should be checked by a licensed electrician.
- Roofs and floors may be weakened by structural damage.
- Hazardous materials may be present e.g. asbestos, chemical residues and other toxic fire related contamination.
- Food, drink and medicines exposed to heat and smoke should be discarded.
- Bushfires produce large amounts of smoke and ash, and your rainwater tank (and water therein) could have become contaminated from debris and ash, or dead animals.  
“Do not consume or use the water from your water tanks unless you are certain it is safe to do so.”
- It may also be necessary to clean roofs, gutters and down pipes that are used for collecting drinking water.
- Septic or underground tanks may have been damaged. Avoid walking or driving on top of them.
- Gas cylinders could be damaged and at risk of failing causing serious harm.

## Notes on Fire Event Related Contamination

### Contamination Types

Depending on what has been burned in the fire or severely heat affected, a range of potentially hazardous contamination may be present within and around your property. It is important to be aware of what these may be to ensure they are addressed adequately and to help prevent exposure.

Fire related contamination may include, but may not be limited to;

- Asbestos particles  
Construction pre-1990 – asbestos highly likely – don’t enter without an inspection first if there is any damage  
Construction 1990-1995 – asbestos possible – enter with care – provide a link to where asbestos and lead based paints and PCBs may be a risk if building is damaged  
Construction post-1995 – asbestos unlikely
- Actual ash, soot and char
- Chemical residues from burning petrochemicals, plastics and other composite products (especially solvents, pesticides/herbicides and other farm use chemicals)
- Gases (Volatile Organic Compounds) being released from partially burned chemicals or materials
- Mould and bacteria from materials being subject to excess or prolonged exposure to moisture/dampness
- Heavy metals from certain paints, chemicals and materials being burned
- PCB’s (polychlorinated biphenyls) from household appliances pre- 1977
- Garden, household and farm chemicals

## Potential Health Effects

There are many potential health effects related to exposure to fire related contamination. These range from short term minor irritation to long term chronic health conditions.

As such, it is extremely important to minimize the risk of exposure to any and all fire related contamination. This can be done through avoidance and letting others qualified in fire restoration undertake the work or taking preventative measures to protect yourself from exposure.

People who are elderly, infants, or have medical conditions should limit their exposure to affected areas. See your GP if you have any health concerns relating to the bushfires.

If there are known hazards, a suitably qualified professional should be consulted for advice/instruction.





## Returning to Your Property

### **Use protective clothing to check your property after a bushfire**

Cover any wounds (including burns of any degree) or abrasions to avoid infection or exposure to contamination.

Make sure you wear the minimum protective clothing before entering your property, including:

- sturdy footwear
- heavy-duty work gloves
- disposable overalls (over long sleeves and trousers)
- minimum P2 face dust mask (a fitted respirator with changeable cartridges is preferred to get a better seal for protection)
- protective eyewear (preferably fitted)

When leaving the property, dispose of gloves, coveralls and face masks into a garbage bag. Wash your hands after removing contaminated clothing and articles. Shoes should be cleaned before being worn again.

## Things to collect

If you need to enter your property or business, check with the relevant authorities. They will advise you if it is safe to enter. Ensure you follow all instructions they give you. You may need to get advice from a structural engineer.

There will be many things that you will want to retrieve. Focus however on finding the following priority items:

- Identification – Driver's License, Medicare, Health fund
- Credit cards
- Legal documents – Marriage Certificate, Birth Certificate, Immunization records
- Business records
- Medications or prescriptions (for replacement purposes only)
- Eyeglasses, hearing aids or personal aids
- Personal items such as jewelry, photo albums, videos
- Insurance information
- Wallets and other valuables
- Car keys
- Other valuables

*If you're insured, check with your insurance company before removing any items.*

## Things to Document

Start a list of damaged items. Pay particular attention to recording brands and model numbers. *If you're insured, your insurance company may appoint a specialist to do this for you.*

Example of record keeping format for damaged items

Item	Brand	Model	Value

## Restoring Property After Fire Damage

Bushfire smoke and fire related contamination can cause damage to building surfaces and personal property. It may penetrate electronic devices or other appliances. Fire related contamination can often look like common dust but can contain toxic elements which can be harmful to humans and animals.

If you are insured, your property or business insurer may organise and pay for cleaning up, restoration and securing your property as well as removal of debris. Contact them before cleaning or arranging repairs yourself. Incorrect cleaning techniques can limit successful restoration outcomes or even make things worse.

If you are not insured, depending on the extent of damage, you may need to hire professional fire and water damage restorers. Look for a restorer who can provide credentials and RIA (Restoration Industry Association) membership indicating professional training and status in insurance repairs and restoration. The knowledge required for specifying restoration techniques with fire, smoke and odour differs from general maintenance and cleaning contractors.

To assist your restorer, the following can assist getting life back to normal fast:

- Notify your restorer if there is anyone who suffers from allergies or has health concerns.
- Create a list of high priority items – this might include clothes, school uniforms and books, sporting equipment, bedding, and computers. Sometimes your restorer will pack your belongings so that they can be restored. It is much easier to locate these items for priority processing if they are identified early.
- Identify with your restorer any collections, artwork, items of sentimental value, items with religious and cultural significance, or other items of high value to ensure that they are appropriately handled.
- Identify with your restorer buildings which are of historical or cultural significance. This can include buildings with heritage overlays, cultural or religious significance.



## **Some General Guidelines If You are Not Insured**

Ventilate the interior by opening doors and windows. A large/high volume fan can be placed in an opening to exhaust dirty air out of the property as well as draw “fresh” air in. Take care to minimise the disruption of settled fire related contamination (soot and char) as this may become airborne and an inhalation risk.

### **Kitchen (including food items)**

Discard all food, drinks and medicines exposed to the fire, smoke or water.

Don't refreeze thawed food. This includes all perishable foods and non-perishable foods such as canned and packaged foods.

Wash cooking pots and pans, crockery and utensils with detergent and water. – DO NOT USE BLEACH.

Have all electrical appliances assessed by a qualified service person before you use them.

### **Walls, floors and ceilings**

Clean soot and smoke from the interior using a HEPA filter equipped vacuum (with soft bristle nylon brush attachment) starting at the ceiling, upper and lower walls working down to floor. Smoke residues may be removed with a mild soap or detergent. Microfiber cloths work best rather than cotton or synthetic materials.

Pay special attention to ledges and voids. Ceilings, interstitial spaces (between levels of double story properties) and wall cavities may also require decontamination and the removal and disposal of any affected insulation. A Restoration specialist is equipped to remove contaminants and odours from these spaces/materials.

### **Furniture and furnishings (including floor coverings)**

If soft furnishings and window coverings are dry, remove all soot and debris by thoroughly vacuuming with a HEPA filter equipped vacuum cleaner. Normal domestic vacuum cleaners will most likely redistribute contaminants through property.

Rugs and carpets and soft furnishings should be dried as fast as possible to increase their likelihood of restoration and to prevent microbial contamination.

All soft furnishings should be professionally steam cleaned by qualified trades/technician familiar with Fire Damage Restoration techniques.





### **Leather and Books**

Following vacuuming with a soft brush attachment, wipe leather goods with a slightly damp cloth, then a dry cloth. Stuff purses and shoes with butchers' paper to retain shape. Leather should be left to dry away from heat and sun.

Books and art must be taken care of as soon as possible. If you don't have access to a restoration professional, contact your local library or book or art restorer.

### **Building Exterior**

Clean the exterior of the building using a mild alkaline detergent and freshwater rinsing. The exterior includes washing off the building, footpaths and driveways. Care should be taken in relation to run off of contaminated wastewater.

Smoke and soot are acidic and can permanently damage metal surfaces. Pay attention to metal window frames, baths, tap ware and appliances.

### **Heating and Cooling Systems**

If smoke has entered the property, there's a good chance it has also infiltrated the internal components of any heating and cooling systems. Operating a contaminated heating or cooling system can redistribute airborne contamination creating an inhalation risk.

- Any air filters should be cleaned or replaced.
- Both internal and external surfaces and components of heating and cooling units should be cleaned.
- Flexible air ducts should be cleaned or replaced, if contaminated.

Preventing recontamination following restoration:

- Using heavy walk off mats at all entrances will help prevent contaminants being tracked back inside. These need to be maintained.
- Wear coveralls when working outdoors that can be removed before entering your property or business.
- Ensure that the areas surrounding any building are clear and free from loose contamination or debris that could be blown back into a cleaned building by winds.
- The use of HEPA filter equipped Air Filtration Devices or "Air Scrubbers" during the cleaning of your property will help capture airborne particles. There are several businesses that hire these units.

## It's Ok to Ask for Help

Communities and individuals affected by bushfire can experience a range of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that can be intense, confusing and frightening. It is normal to feel unsettled and disrupted for a while. You may be able to overcome any problems yourself but don't be afraid to ask for help.

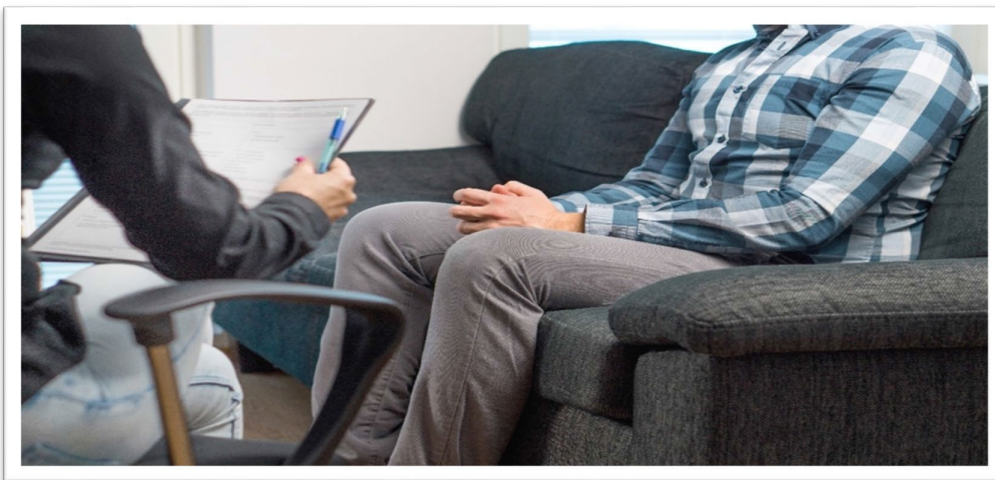
After a crisis it is often easier to talk to someone who is not involved and is trained to listen. To assist you, Beyond Blue has developed a list of resources and information around [Bushfires and Mental Health](#). It contains high-quality evidence-based advice on dealing with the emotional impact of bushfires, information about the signs and symptoms of emotional distress, and links to several useful websites.

You'll also find links that will allow you to assess whether you are eligible for financial grants, loans or other forms of assistance from your state and federal governments.

If you're feeling distressed or overwhelmed, mental health professionals are available 24/7 at the Beyond Blue Support Service on 1300 22 4636 or at [www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support) for online chat (3pm to 12am AEST) or email (responses within 24 hours).

For immediate support call Lifeline on 13 11 14 and in an emergency, always call triple zero (000).

The Australian Counselling Association may also be able to help you search for a counsellor in your area. Telephone 1300 784 333 or visit [www.theaca.net.au](http://www.theaca.net.au)



RIA (Restoration Industry Association) <https://www.restorationindustry.org/>

WIRES Wildlife Rescue is the largest wildlife rescue & rehabilitation charity in Australia. It is a non-profit organisation providing rescue and rehabilitation for all native Australian fauna. All animal rescuers and caretakers are volunteers.

Help rescue and care for the innocent victims of bushfires.

<https://www.wires.org.au/donate/emergency-fund>



## **Disclaimer**

This document has been prepared in good faith to assist property and business owners returning to bushfire affected properties. It is not intended as, nor does it necessarily represent the standards of care and best practice for Professional Smoke and Fire Damage Restoration. Suitably qualified Professionals should be consulted in their relevant field of expertise. For any medical impacts of bushfire related exposure or illness a suitably qualified medical professional should be consulted.