

After a fire: private drinking water and water tank safety

Community information

If you live in a bushfire-affected area your drinking water tank could have become contaminated from debris, ash, dead animals or aerial fire retardants.

If the water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not drink it or give it to animals.

Water from a river or creek should never be used for drinking or preparing food unless it has been properly treated.

Water drawn from deep bores or wells should be safe to use.

How can I prevent my drinking water tank from becoming contaminated?

Prior to a bushfire:

- ensure your tank is properly sealed and maintained
- disconnect the downpipes to your tanks as soon as there is a bushfire risk.

After a bushfire:

- only reconnect the downpipes when the roof has been cleaned (either manually or after a good flush of rain).

What if it rains before I can disconnect the downpipes?

- Prior to using your water inspect your roof, gutters and if possible look inside your tank for signs of contamination.
- Water testing is not necessary because contamination is usually obvious.
- If your water has been contaminated the taste, colour or smell, will change.
- Contaminated water should not be used for drinking or preparing food. Use an alternate supply for drinking.
- Tank water that is not suitable for drinking can be used on the garden.

What do I do if there are dead animals in my drinking water system?

Wear gloves to remove dead animals from your roof, your gutters or in your tank. Dispose gloves after use, and disinfect your tank water before re-using it. Water can be disinfected by bringing the water to a rolling boil, or by using chlorine (bleach).

To boil water for drinking purposes: bring water to a boil by heating water until a continuous and rapid stream of air-bubble is produced from the bottom of a pan or kettle. Kettles with automatic shut off switches are suitable.

To disinfect your tank water using chlorine, use the following instructions.

For every 1,000 litres of water in your tank you can safely add:

- approximately 125 mL or 125 g of 4 per cent chlorine household bleach (avoid bleaches that contain detergents or perfumes), or
- approximately 40 mL or 40 g of 12.5 per cent chlorine liquid swimming pool or dairy factory chlorine, or
- approximately 8 mL or 8 g of 65 per cent granular 'swimming pool' chlorine.

Note: one teaspoon is approximately five grams.

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

What do I do if my roof and tank is affected by firefighting water or fire retardant?

Firefighting activities can use any available source of water, such as farm dams and rivers. This water is not suitable for drinking, if it enters your water tank do not drink the water.

Fire retardants have been used in Victoria for the past 30 years to slow the spread or intensity of a fire. They help firefighters on the ground and are sometimes dropped from aircraft.

If deposited on your roof, these chemicals should not enter your tank if the down pipes are disconnected. Prior to reconnecting your down pipes, hose off the roof catchment area or wait for a heavy rain to prevent possible fire retardant entering your tank.

If fire retardants have entered your water tank, do not drink the water. High levels of ammonia and sulfate in water will make the water smell terrible and taste salty. It will not be suitable as drinking water for humans or animals (pets or livestock).

Fire retardant contaminated water can still be used for irrigation and firefighting purposes.

Boiling water does not remove fire retardants or other chemicals from your water.

If your water tank has been contaminated it is strongly recommended that you get it professionally cleaned prior to re-using it for drinking purposes.

How soon after a fire can I use my drinking water tank?

If the water in your tank has not been contaminated, the water should be safe to drink. However, do not reconnect your downpipes until your roof has been cleaned or after a good flush of rain.

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

If you want your tank cleaned it is best to employ a specialist. Working in a confined space is dangerous

For further information

- For local water cartage or tank cleaners, contact the environmental health section of your local council.
- For general information on fires in Victoria, contact the VicEmergency hotline on 1800 226 226.

For more bushfire and public health information, refer to the bushfire information fact sheets available from the Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health and Human Services at:

www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/bushfires

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

© State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, February 2019.