

health

Chief Health Officer Advisory

17 March 2014

Status: Active

Update on the Hazelwood open cut coal mine fire

Status: Active**Date issued:** 17 March 2014**Issued by:** Dr Rosemary Lester, Chief Health Officer, Victoria**Issued to:** Local government authorities, health and aged sector, government departments and agencies, service providers and community groups.

Key messages

- The Chief Health Officer has lifted the advice for temporary relocation of vulnerable groups in the southern parts of Morwell, so they can now plan to return to their homes and workplaces.
- This advice is based on an improvement in air quality as monitored by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and confirmation from the Fire Services Commissioner that the fire is contained.
- The Community Health Assessment Centre will continue to operate in Morwell at least until 30 March to provide support to the community through basic health checks and advice.
- The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) will continue to monitor air quality.
- The focus is now on supporting the Morwell community to clean-up homes and workplaces with assistance and information available through the Department of Human Services and the City of Latrobe.
- While the ash and ash residue are non-toxic, clean-up activities may aggravate pre-existing conditions such as asthma, so encourage patients in these groups to access support available and avoid unnecessary exertion or exposure to ash deposits.

What is the issue?

The Hazelwood open cut mine fire resulted in a smoke plume over Morwell and other parts of the Latrobe Valley. Residents experienced periods of low visibility due to high particle concentrations in the air and discomfort from the prolonged exposure to smoke.

In order to reduce exposure of individuals in at risk groups, the Chief Health Officer recommended their temporary relocation away from the smoke.

The Community Health Assessment Centre established by Ambulance Victoria in Morwell to provide basic health assessments to residents will continue to operate until 30 March. After this time, it will be reassessed based on community need. Over 2000 people have visited this Centre and a limited number have been referred on to their General Practitioners. No significant increase in presentations to Latrobe Regional Hospital has been reported, General Practitioners in the Latrobe Valley may see increased demand as residents begin returning home. This Advisory provides an update and links to resources on prevention to share with those patients.

Who is at risk?

People aged over 65, children under school age, pregnant women and anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition should continue to reduce exposure to ash residue during cleanup.

Prevention

The community, but particularly those at high risk, are advised to avoid prolonged or heavy physical activity or exposure to ash during clean-up of houses or workplaces. While the ash is not toxic, breathing in fine particles may aggravate existing heart or lung conditions. Those with symptoms such as wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing should seek medical advice promptly. People with asthma should follow their asthma plan.

Support for clean-up is available through the Department of Human Services and the City of Latrobe Council.

Clinical advice

Clinical advice or onward referral for further assessment or management should be through usual pathways.

Psycho-social support

Patients needing psycho-social support or assessment for support for clean-up should call DHS on 1800 006 468. or visit recovery.vic.gov.au

More information

Information on recovery support– www.latrobe.vic.gov.au or call 1800 017 777.

Clinical information

Asthma Foundation - <http://www.asthmaaustralia.org.au>

Air quality forecasts - www.epa.vic.gov.au/our-work/monitoring-the-environment/air-quality-bulletins

Consumer health information at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood/index.htm>

- Cleaning up after the fires
- Rainwater tanks
- Community update - 17 March 2014
- Smoke and your health
- Face masks - Q&A
- Ash fall-out

For details on the Community Health Assessment Centre go to www.health.vic.gov.au

Contacts

Specific queries may be directed to Environmental Health, Department of Health on 1300 761 874 or Environmental.healthunit@health.vic.gov.au

Yours sincerely



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Authorised by the Victorian Government, Melbourne.