

health

Chief Health Officer Advisory

20 March 2014

Status: Active

Update on the Hazelwood open cut coal mine fire

Status: Active**Date issued:** 20 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 is not a health concern, clean up activities can potentially stir up ash material. Ash particles although too big to be breathed into the lungs, are a nuisance and may irritate the eyes, nose or throat. Ash is also mildly irritating to the skin.

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 to their General Practitioner or the emergency department of Latrobe Regional Hospital for further assessment. No significant increase in presentations to Latrobe Regional Hospital has been reported. This Advisory provides an update and links to resources on prevention to share with patients.

Who is at risk?

Anyone with a pre-existing lung condition should continue to reduce exposure to ash stirred up during cleaning.

Prevention

Anyone undertaking clean up work should practice good hygiene – minimise stirring up ash particles and wash ash off hands, face and neck. Young children should not play in ash until the affected areas, including surfaces, have been cleaned up. 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 Latrobe City 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 Latrobe City Council on 1800 017 777 or visit www.latrobe.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
- Carbon monoxide factsheet

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.