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health

Chief Health Officer Advisory

4 March 2014

Status: Active

Update on the Hazelwood open cut coal mine fire

Status: Active**Date issued:** 4 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

- Temporary relocation away from the smoke caused by the Hazelwood open cut mine fire has been recommended for people aged over 65, pre-school aged children, pregnant women and anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition living or working in Morwell South.
- High levels of smoke can aggravate existing cardiac and respiratory conditions and cause irritated eyes, coughing or wheezing. Health professionals should note the prevailing smoky conditions and the potential impact on their at risk patients.
- The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is continuing to monitor smoke levels resulting from the Hazelwood open cut mine fire for the Latrobe Valley and other areas of Gippsland. Air quality forecasts are available on the EPA website at www.epa.vic.gov.au/our-work/monitoring-the-environment/air-quality-bulletins

What is the issue?

The Hazelwood open cut mine fire has been burning for approximately three weeks. This has resulted in a smoke plume over Morwell and other parts of the Latrobe Valley. Residents are experiencing 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 has recommended their temporary relocation away from the smoke.

A Health Assessment Centre has been established by Ambulance Victoria in Morwell to provide basic health assessments to residents. Over 1300 people have visited this Centre and a limited number have been referred on to their General Practitioners. To date there has been no significant increase in presentations to Latrobe Regional Hospital. General Practitioners in the Latrobe Valley have reported they are busy to very busy with increased demand, but appointments remain available. Common themes include asthma, COPD, anxiety, eye/throat irritation and coughing.

This Advisory provides an update and links to resources on prevention to share with those patients.

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is continuing to issue daily smoke alerts for the Latrobe Valley and other areas of Gippsland.

Who is at risk?

All individuals in the area where smoke impact is high can experience discomfort from prolonged exposure however people aged over 65, pre-school aged children, pregnant women and anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition are most at risk.

Prevention

All at risk groups have been advised to temporarily relocate away from the smoke until the air quality improves. Anyone with a cardiac or respiratory condition should follow the treatment advised by their doctor and keep at least five days supply of medication on hand. People with asthma should follow their asthma plan.

The community, but particularly those at high risk, are also advised to avoid prolonged or heavy physical activity outdoors and to remain aware of smoke levels in their immediate area. Those with symptoms such as wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing should seek medical advice promptly.

The CFA have made face masks available through the Latrobe Council, however to be effective, they must be correctly fitted and worn. (See the [Facemasks Q & A](#) for more information).

Clinical advice

Clinical advice or onward referral for further assessment or management should be through usual pathways. Carbon monoxide is being monitored in the community and has remained at levels that should not cause symptoms, however if you have concerns for a patient regarding carbon monoxide exposure, they should be referred to the Emergency Department at Latrobe Regional Hospital.

Toxicological advice can be obtained from the Poisons Information Line 131 126 or speak with the clinical toxicologists from Austin Health on (03) 9496 5000.

Psycho-social support

Patients needing psycho-social support or assessment for financial assistance should call DHS on 1800 006 468 or attend the Community Respite Centre in Moe.

More information

Clinical information

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

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

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

- [Ash fall- out - factsheet](#)
- [Smoke and your health – factsheet](#)
- [Facemasks – Q & A](#)
- [Rainwater tanks – factsheet](#)
- [Brown coal ash and your health – factsheet](#)
- [Carbon monoxide - factsheet](#)


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

For details on the Community Respite Centre go to www.recovery.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

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Rosemary Lester', written in black ink.

Dr Rosemary Lester PSM
Chief Health Officer
Authorised by the Victorian Government, Melbourne.