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health

Chief Health Officer Advisory

21 February 2014

Status: Active

Health issues from the Morwell Mine fire

Status: Active**Date issued:** 21 February 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 Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is continuing to monitor smoke levels resulting from the Morwell Mine fire for the Latrobe Valley and other areas of Gippsland.
- High levels of smoke can aggravate existing heart or lung conditions and cause irritated eyes, coughing or wheezing. Health professionals should note the predicted smoky conditions and the potential impact on their at risk patients.
- 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?

Smoke is a mixture of different-sized particles, water vapour and gases, including carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides.

The larger particles which are visible to the eye contribute to the visible haze when a fire is burning. They are generally too large to be breathed deeply into the lungs but can irritate the nose and throat. Finer microscopic particles and gases are small enough to be breathed deep into the lungs and can cause health effects.

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) has issued daily smoke alerts for the Latrobe Valley and other areas of Gippsland. This smoke activity is expected to continue for some time. Residents are experiencing periods of low visibility due to high particle concentrations in the air and discomfort from the prolonged exposure to smoke.

General Practitioners in the Latrobe Valley are likely to see an increase in presentations and calls from at risk patients concerned about the health impacts of smoke. This Advisory provides links to resources on prevention to share with those patients.

Who is at risk?

Children, the elderly, smokers and people with preexisting illnesses such as heart or lung conditions (including asthma) are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in fine particles. Symptoms may worsen and include wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing.

Prevention

Anyone with a heart or lung condition should follow the treatment plan advised by their doctor and keep at least five days supply of medication on hand. People with asthma should follow their personal asthma plan.

Everyone, but particularly those at high risk, should avoid prolonged or heavy physical activity outdoors and keep informed of fire activity in their immediate area.

Those with symptoms such as wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing should seek medical advice promptly.

More information

Clinical information

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

Air quality forecasts are available on the EPA website at www.epa.vic.gov.au/our-work/monitoring-the-environment/air-quality-bulletins

Consumer information

[Brown coal ash and your health](#) – factsheet

[Smoke and your health](#) – factsheet

[Clean up after coal mine fires](#) – factsheet

[Rainwater tanks](#) – factsheet

These resources address bushfire smoke but the information is relevant to the Latrobe Valley incident.

[Bushfire smoke and your health](#) – vodcast and translated fact sheets

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/bushfires.htm>

Bushfire smoke and your health – Better Health Channel:

http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Bushfire_smoke?open&utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=site&utm_term=Bushfire_smoke&utm_content=panels&utm_campaign=rotations

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.