

# Hazelwood open cut mine fire

Health update for the community

7 March 2014

Fires burning in the Hazelwood open cut coal mine have produced smoke and ash in Morwell and other areas of the Latrobe Valley. This information update is for those people living and working in and around Morwell.

## What is in the smoke?

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

Very large particles fall onto surfaces as ash.

Smaller sized particles cause visible haze and are too big to be breathed deep into the lungs, but can cause irritation of the eyes, nose and throat.

Very small (ie fine) particles - called "PM particles" - and gases can be breathed deep into the lungs and may cause health effects in some people.

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is monitoring air quality in Morwell and surrounding areas. The Department of Health is providing, and updating health advice based on this air monitoring.

During these fires:

- carbon monoxide levels in the air have not reached a level of concern for the general Morwell community, including sensitive groups
- air levels of fine PM particles have varied with the amount of smoke coming from the mine.

Check the EPA website for air quality updates at [www.epa.vic.gov.au](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au)

The Department of Health website also has information about smoke, ash and carbon monoxide. Go to [www.health.vic.gov.au](http://www.health.vic.gov.au) for information on what you can do to protect your health or the health of anyone in your care.

## Will the smoke affect my health?

Short term health impacts of smoke exposure include itchy eyes, sore throat, runny nose and coughing. These effects usually pass once a person moves away from the smoke.

Children, older adults, pregnant women, smokers and people with pre-existing 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.

During smoky conditions, people in these sensitive groups should rest as much as possible and stay out of the smoke.

Long term health effects from air pollution usually occur after several years or a lifetime of exposure. The smoke from these fires has affected local air quality for a number of weeks, rather than years, therefore long-term health effects are not expected.

### What about a facemask?

Face masks (called 'P2 masks') can help to filter out fine particles in smoke but they must be fitted and worn properly which is difficult for children. Keep them out of the smoke if possible.

## Should I stay or go?

Whether smoke affects you depends on your age, if you have a pre-existing medical condition such as asthma or heart disease and the length of time you are exposed to the smoke.

This is why **temporary relocation** away from the smoke is currently recommended for people living or working in **the southern area of Morwell**, south of the railway line who are:

- aged 65 or over
- under school age
- pregnant or,
- have a heart or lung condition, including asthma.

If you already have a heart or lung condition, including asthma follow your treatment plan given to you by your doctor.

For information and assistance with relocation call the Department of Human Services on **1800 006 468** or go to [www.recovery.vic.gov.au](http://www.recovery.vic.gov.au)

## I have left – when can I return home?

When air quality improves and the fire is controlled, a public announcement will be made by the Chief Health Officer.

Recovery planning is already well underway and will be co-ordinated through Latrobe City Council with assistance from numerous state departments and agencies.

## What if I choose to stay?

**If you choose to stay in the area it is important that you take steps to protect your health. When at home**

- When it's smoky keep your doors and windows closed as much as possible.
- When there's not much smoke around, open up your house to fresh air.
- Don't smoke, or burn candles or woodstoves.
- If you have an air conditioner, switch it to 'recycle' or 'recirculate' so less smoke comes into your home.
- Wash herbs, fruit and vegetables from your garden before you eat them. Ash should not affect your garden.
- If your tank water tastes, looks or smells unusual, do not use it for drinking or bathing for yourself or for your pets. The town drinking water supply is safe.
- Air purifiers are not recommended.
- Avoid outdoor exercise when it is smoky and try to spend as much time as you can indoors.

### Cleaning up

- Sweeping or vacuuming can stir up dust and make air-quality inside your home worse. When cleaning up ash, gently sweep and use a wet mop to clean floors.
- Avoid vacuuming unless you have a HEPA filter vacuum cleaner.
- Wash soft furnishing and clothes according to cleaning instructions.

## Community Health Assessment Centre

If you want to talk to a nurse or ambulance paramedic about your health please visit the Community Health Assessment Centre at Ambulance Victoria Regional Office, near the Mid Valley Shopping Centre at 2 Saskia Way, Morwell. You do not need an appointment.

## Community Information and Recovery Centre

A Community Information and Recovery Centre has been set up in the Town Hall in Albert Street Moe, A bus, provided by Latrobe Regional Council, is also available to take people to the centre as needed.

Call 1300 367 700 for more information.

**Anyone who is finding it hard to breath or has chest pain should call 000 immediately.**

If you are worried about your health, call NURSE-ON-CALL on **1300 60 60 24** or see your doctor.

## Further health information

⊗ For more information about health issues go to: [www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood)

Printed copies of these information sheets are also available at the Community Health Assessment Centre in Morwell and the Community Information and Recovery Centre in Moe:

- Ash fall-out
- Smoke and your health
- Face masks - Q&A
- Rainwater tanks
- Cleaning up coal ash and smoke in the house
- Carbon monoxide

⊗ For information about asthma go to the Asthma Foundation of Victoria's website at [www.asthma.org.au](http://www.asthma.org.au) or call 1800 278 462.

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