

FACT SHEET 1

Bushfires, bushfire smoke and your health



What is a bushfire?

- In Australia, two different types of fires can happen in areas where there is a lot of bush, trees and grass.
 1. Fires that are started and carefully controlled by firefighters, park rangers, forestry workers, or Indigenous people are called **planned fires or planned burns**. These fires are mostly used to manage or remove weeds, bushes or fallen branches and leaves. Planned fires most often happen from August to October and March to May. They can sometimes make a lot of smoke.
 2. Unplanned or uncontrolled fires are called **bushfires**. These fires may become large or dangerous. They can move fast, especially on hot and windy days. Bushfires usually happen in January or February but can also happen from September to April. Bushfires can burn for a long time and make a lot of smoke.
- If a **bushfire** is near to your home, **this can be dangerous**.

How bushfires can hurt you or make you sick

- You might get burnt by flames if you are very close to the fire. You can also be burnt by strong heat from the fire, even if you are a long way from the flames.
- During a bushfire, your body can get very hot for three reasons.
 1. Bushfires usually happen on hot days.
 2. There will be a lot of heat from the fire.
 3. To protect you from the fire, you need to wear clothes that fully cover your body, but this makes it harder to stay cool.
- When your body gets too hot, you can get sick. This is called heat exhaustion. If it lasts for a long time and you don't cool down, you can get heat stroke. Signs of heat stroke are headaches, tiredness, hot and dry skin and being very thirsty. This is a medical emergency.

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- If you are near to the bushfire, the air will be very smoky. This will make it hard to breathe, and you might get a headache. Your eyes will get sore and it can be hard to see through smoke. This means it isn't safe to drive when the air is smoky.
- You could get hurt if buildings and trees around you fall over while they are burning.
- You might still get hurt or sick after the fire has gone past you. Trees and buildings that were burnt by the fire can fall over. Water tanks can be damaged and it might not be safe to drink water that comes from them. Power lines or trees along the road might have fallen over and roads might be blocked. And there might still be a lot of ash and dust in the air, which can make it hard to breathe.

How bushfire smoke can make you sick

- Smoke in the air can make you sick, even if you are a long way from the fire. You might cough or get headaches or sore eyes. Usually, these problems only last as long as the smoke is in the air, and you will feel better again once the smoke has gone.
- You do need to be extra careful to stay away from the smoke if you have asthma, diabetes or heart disease. This is because smoke can make some conditions worse; for example, you might have an asthma attack. You should also try to stay away from smoke as much as possible if you are pregnant or if you are very old or very young.

Bushfires and your mental health

- Being in a bushfire or close to a bushfire is very stressful for most people. Bushfires are unpredictable so you might feel unsafe because you don't know what is going to happen next. If you know what you need to do if there is a bushfire, you will be prepared and probably won't feel as stressed or worried.
- Even long after the bushfire has happened, your memories might make you feel anxious, worried or upset. For example, on a hot day with lots of wind, you might worry there will be another fire and feel nervous or frightened. This is very common. It can take a long time to recover from a bushfire, and everyone will experience this differently.
- The fact sheet 'What can I do in a bushfire?' will give you more information about how to prepare for a bushfire and what to do if you are in or near one. It will also tell you where you can go for help if a bushfire has affected you.

