



Government of Western Australia  
Department of Fire & Emergency Services



# AFTER THE FIRE

**A GUIDE TO HELP YOU RECOVER  
FROM THE IMPACT OF A BUSHFIRE.**





Photo courtesy of Perth Now

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## AFTER THE FIRE

**The unthinkable has happened, your home has been damaged or destroyed by fire.**

### **What can you do?**

Being involved in a bushfire can be a difficult experience to take in and accept at first, but there are people and organisations that can help you. You can take positive action right now to begin rebuilding your life and your home.

This booklet will help you through the days and weeks ahead.

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## RETURNING HOME

If you made the decision to be safe and leave early, by relocating to a safer place, it may be several days before emergency services give the all clear to return home.

During a bushfire, roads will be closed for your safety and for safe access to the fire by emergency services. These road blocks are managed by police who will not allow you to enter under any circumstance.

Emergency services will do their best to enable you to return to your property as soon as it is safe to do so.

When you do return home, you need to take care when moving around the fire affected area, especially your property, as conditions will have changed.

Trees damaged in the fire may drop branches or fall over. Burnt stumps and trees may still be smouldering and burnt ground may still be hot.

Fires may also restart from hidden smouldering debris. If this happens call triple zero **(000)** immediately to report the fire.

### BUILDING AND SITE SAFETY

Be aware that your home may not be structurally sound and going into the building could be very dangerous. Walls, roofs and ceilings can give way without warning and floors or stairs may not be as stable as they appear.

You should only go into your home if it has been declared safe. A building inspector may be required to ensure your home is structurally safe before you go inside. Your insurance company may contact a building inspector for you, depending on your level of insurance, or the local government's building inspector may be able to help.

When moving and looking through your house, be careful of sharp items such as glass shards, corrugated iron and rubble that could cause injury. If asbestos has been damaged on your property, you should seek professional advice before attempting any repairs or cleaning up as it is extremely dangerous.

The fire or falling debris may have damaged chemical containers in your home or shed. If you are unsure about handling these chemicals, contact DFES during business hours on **9395 9300** for advice.

If you suspect water and heat from the fire have damaged firearms, ammunition or explosives, contact your local police station.

### ELECTRICITY AND GAS SUPPLY

Utilities such as gas, electricity and water are likely to have been shut off or disconnected during the fire.

The suppliers of your power, water and gas will need to send a qualified tradesperson to inspect and repair any damage to your services, and arrange for them to be reconnected.

If you are insured, your insurance company can arrange this. If you are not insured, you will need to organise this yourself by contacting each supplier and tradesperson.

## WELFARE CENTRES

During an emergency, evacuation and welfare centres are established and coordinated by the Department of Communities.

They are established so that appropriate support services such as shelter, emergency accommodation, food, clothing, financial assistance, registration, personal support and other welfare services can be provided. Longer term support services may be provided if required (eg. counselling).

## FIRE INVESTIGATION

When the fire officer in charge of an incident cannot find out what started the fire they may call in the Fire Investigation Officer. If someone has been seriously injured or died in the fire the Police will also attend.

It is the responsibility of the Fire Investigation Officer or Police Officer to make sure your house is secure while the investigation is occurring. They will put barrier tape around your home or property, so people do not enter, as it may not be safe and could compromise the investigation.

If you need to go into your home in this situation a Police Officer or Fire Investigation Officer may go with you. Once the investigation is complete you will be able to access your home.

### DETERMINING THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE

Sometimes the cause of a fire can be difficult to determine. Investigations for large fires can often take months and even years before a cause is identified.

In some cases the cause of the fire might not ever become known, even after a thorough investigation has taken place. This may be distressing for some people who want immediate answers.

It is important during this time to remain patient and understand that Fire Investigators, the Police Arson Squad and other agencies are working hard to get a result.

### THE MEDIA HAS ARRIVED

The media often report on fires in their news bulletins. If a reporter approaches you for an interview, you can decide if you want to speak to them or not. If you agree to be interviewed, you can discuss with them beforehand the kind of questions they will ask so you know what to expect.

If you feel uncomfortable about any part of the interview, let the reporter know you do not want to continue. If the cause of the fire has not yet been found and is still under investigation, it is best not to discuss anything with the media.





## ANIMALS

### ANIMALS, LIVESTOCK AND PET WELFARE

The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) will assess the health and nutritional requirements of livestock after a fire. Contact your local DPIRD office for further information.

It is your responsibility to address any injury or trauma to livestock as soon as you can access your animals, and to provide clean water and food.

For help with pet welfare contact your local veterinarian. RSPCA WA may provide support and relocation for lost and injured animals after major fires and can be contacted on **9209 9300**.

## SALVAGE

### REMOVING PERSONAL ITEMS

If parts of your home have not been destroyed and it is safe to enter, you may want to get the following items:

- Identification such as passport, birth certificate and drivers licence
- Car keys and wallet
- Credit cards
- Cheque books
- Legal documents
- Insurance information
- Medications that have not been affected by the fire
- Eye glasses, hearing aids, prosthetic devices or personal aids
- Personal items such as jewellery, photo albums, electrical devices
- Other valuables.

### SALVAGE HINTS

If your home has not been completely destroyed, you may be able to save items that have been affected by heat, smoke or water. Here are some tips to help you in their restoration. The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials can provide further information on how you can salvage your family's precious belongings. [aiccm.org.au](http://aiccm.org.au)

- **Clothing** – smoke odour and soot can sometimes be washed from clothing. The following often works on clothing that can be bleached. Take four to six tablespoons of washing powder, one cup of household chlorine bleach and four litres of warm water and mix well. Add clothes, rinse with clear water and then dry. To remove fresh mildew, wash with soap and warm water, then rinse and dry in the sun.
- **Cooking utensils** – wash with soapy water, rinse and then polish with a fine powdered cleaner. You can polish copper and brass with special polish, or using salt sprinkled on a piece of lemon or on a cloth saturated with vinegar.
- **Power and electrical appliances** – do not use appliances, particularly electrical appliances that have been exposed to water, until you have an authorised service technician check them. Do not attempt to check them yourself.
- **Food and water** – throw away any food, drinks and medicines that have been exposed to heat, smoke or water damage. Take photos for your insurance company of anything you throw out.  
  
Wash cans and jars in detergent and water, marking food contents on the can or jar with a permanent marker if labels come off. Do not use cans that are rusted, dented or have swollen.  
  
Fridges and freezers left unopened and turned off will only hold their temperature for a short time, but you may be able to save the frozen food. Keep the freezer closed as it has enough insulation to keep food frozen for at least one day. Do not refreeze any food that has thawed.  
  
Water from your water tank may also be contaminated and you should not drink or cook with it. For advice on using rainwater after a bushfire visit [public.health.wa.gov.au](http://public.health.wa.gov.au) (enter 'rainwater and bushfire' in the search box).
- **Flooring and rugs** – allow rugs and carpets to dry thoroughly. You can clean throw rugs by beating, sweeping or vacuuming, and then shampooing them. Dry them as quickly as possible by laying them flat and exposing them to warm air; using a fan will speed up the process. Make sure they are thoroughly dry, as surfaces that appear dry may still have moisture at the base of the tufts and this can quickly cause a rug to rot.
- **Mattresses and pillows** – A company that builds and repairs mattresses may be able to restore your damaged mattress. If you must use your mattress temporarily, put it in the sun to dry and then cover it with rubber or plastic sheeting before use. It is almost impossible to remove the smell of smoke from feather pillows or foam.
- **Leather and books** – wipe leather goods with a damp cloth, then a dry cloth. Stuff purses, bags and shoes with newspaper to help them retain their shape. Leave suitcases open. Dry wet leather goods away from heat and sun.  
  
Rinse leather or suede jackets in cold water and dry them away from heat and sun. Attend to wet books as soon as possible. The best method is to freeze them



in a vacuum freezer as this will remove the moisture without damaging the pages. If there is a delay in locating such a freezer, place them in a normal freezer until a vacuum freezer can be located. A book restorer may be able to give special advice.

- **Locks and hinges** – locks should be taken apart, wiped with kerosene and oiled. If locks cannot be removed, squirt machine oil through a bolt opening or keyhole and work the door knob to spread the oil. Hinges should also be thoroughly cleaned and oiled.
- **Walls, floors and ceilings** – remove soot and smoke with water and mild soap or detergent.
- **Furniture** – do not dry your furniture directly in the sun as the wood will warp and twist out of shape. You can rub the wood surface with a 4/0 steel wool pad dipped in liquid polishing wax, wipe with a soft cloth and then buff. Remove any drawers and let them dry thoroughly. Wet wood can decay and mould, so remove any mud or dirt by scrubbing with a stiff brush and cleaning solution, then allow it to dry thoroughly  
  
Open doors and windows for good ventilation.



## INSURANCE

You need to tell your insurance company or broker about the fire as soon as you can. They will send a representative to estimate the cost of the damage and determine a settlement figure.

If you are a tenant and have contents insurance, in addition to telling your real estate agent, owner, landlord or Housing Authority about the fire and the damage, you should also contact your insurer.

You will need to provide them with a forwarding address and telephone number if you have had to leave the damaged home. Check to see if your policy covers you for emergency accommodation, if staying with family or friends is not an option.

The sooner your insurance company or broker is notified, the sooner your claim can be processed.

Check with your insurance company before you enter into a contract with cleaning or repair contractors, as you may be left with bills to pay that would have been covered by insurance.

If you cannot remember the name of your insurance company or the details are not available, you can contact the Insurance Council of Australia on **1300 728 228**.



## SECURITY & PROTECTION

If you are the owner of the property, you are responsible for organising security of your house while you are waiting for the insurance assessment. Your insurance company will provide you with advice and may be able to organise a contractor to make your home secure. The insurance company may refuse to pay for any losses that occur after the fire.

If you are a tenant you need to tell your real estate agent, owner, landlord or Housing Authority so they can organise site security.

If your home is part of an investigation, it will be the responsibility of the Fire Investigation Officer or Police Officer to secure your home. They will put barrier tape around your home, so people do not enter, as it may not be safe and could compromise the investigation.

If you need to go into your home, a Police Officer or the Fire Investigation Officer may go with you. Once the investigation is finished they will give control of your house back to you.

### HOW TO SECURE YOUR HOUSE

You will need to take reasonable precautions to protect your home from the weather and potential theft or vandalism such as covering any holes in the roof or walls.

You need to make sure that any doors, windows or openings are secure and only approved access to the site is allowed.

This can be done by locking and securing external doors and openings. If necessary, use plywood sheeting or install temporary fencing. General building contractors or firms can also help.

Your home insurer may organise and pay for securing, cleaning and removal of debris from your home, so contact them before cleaning up or arranging repairs. If you are not insured, depending on the extent of damage, you may need to hire professional fire and water damage restorers.

If there are areas that may be damaged more by being left out in the open, State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers can fix tarpaulins and tie down loose items. Ask the fire officer in charge or Police Officer to organise this, or call the SES on **132 500**.



## LEAVING YOUR HOME

You may need to leave your home because of structural damage or if it is unsafe.

If relatives and friends cannot help with accommodation or provide the level of support you need, there are organisations that will be able to help you with emergency accommodation.

### EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

If you are not insured or your insurance company does not cover you for emergency accommodation, contact the Department of Communities (Child Protection and Family Support). They can help you find crisis accommodation and assist with longer term housing.

Housing Authority – Entry Point:  
Free call **1800 065 892** (between 8am and 5pm Monday to Friday)

Crisis Care Helpline: Department of Communities:  
**9223 1111** or free call **1800 199 008** (day or night).

### WHO TO TELL OF YOUR NEW ADDRESS AND CONTACT DETAILS

You may wish to note the name of the person you spoke to and the date for future reference.

- Local police
- Insurance company
- Employer
- Family and friends
- Post office – to hold or forward your mail
- Children's schools
- Delivery services such as newspapers.
- Utility companies such as Telstra and local government
- Bank or mortgage company
- Investigating Police Officer or Fire Investigation Officer (if the fire is under investigation).



## REPAIRS AND REBUILDING

Contact your insurance company immediately to report the damage to your home. Depending on the advice from your insurance company, you may be able to start organising repairs to your home.

Do not throw away damaged items until your insurance company advises you to do so. However, you should photograph perishable items such as food and throw them away as soon as possible. Keep a record and receipts of any emergency repairs you have had done for your insurance company.

Ask if your insurance company has a list of preferred contractors for you to contact to organise repairs.

If you are not insured, get a builder or building consultant to assess the damage to your home. Do not forget to check their qualifications and experience before hiring them. Ask for a written damage report that will help you to get quotes for repairing your home.

Check if you need plans drawn up and approved by a structural engineer and the local government.

Be wary of builders or trade contractors who go door to door selling their services. Never fall victim to high pressure sales tactics aimed at forcing you to make a decision on the spot. It is in your best interest to take the time to check the contractor's qualifications and confirm their references before making a commitment.

### REBUILDING YOUR HOME

It is important that you think about how you can protect your home from fire when rebuilding. You need to take into account the bushfire risk to your home and make building decisions that will reduce the impact of a fire.

The risk to your home from a bushfire is influenced by the distance your house is from the bush and how it is constructed. Your home is more likely to survive a bushfire if it is built to planning and construction standards.

DFES and the Western Australian Planning Commission document, 'Guidelines for Planning in Bushfire Prone Areas' is a helpful guide which provides information about the process for building in bushfire prone areas and how this might improve the chances of your home surviving a bushfire. This document can be found at: [dplh.wa.gov.au](http://dplh.wa.gov.au)

DFES also produces the *Home Owner's Bushfire Survival Manual* which can help you to reduce bushfire risks around your home and make your new home safer. You can find both of these documents at: [dfes.wa.gov.au](http://dfes.wa.gov.au)

## ENTITLEMENTS

If the whole community has been affected a 'one stop shop' may be set up to help you access services such as Centrelink, an Insurance Council of WA representative, utility companies and counsellors. If one has been set up you will be notified through community meetings.

The Department of Communities can provide financial assistance including personal hardship and distress relief payments where applicable. This includes emergency assistance for immediate essential items and emergency accommodation assistance. For more information contact the Department of Communities (Child Protection and Family Support) on **9222 2555** or Freecall (country only) **1800 622 258** between 8am and 5pm Monday to Friday.

If you are an existing or new Centrelink customer receiving a social security or pension benefit, you may be entitled to a crisis payment. To find out if you are eligible, contact Centrelink on **13 28 50**.

If you receive a Veterans' Affairs pension or benefit, you may also be entitled to a crisis payment. Contact Veterans' Affairs on **133 254** to find out if you are eligible.

You might find after a fire that you need emergency accommodation, welfare support services, food or water. Emergency assistance may be available through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements Western Australia (DRFAWA). DRFAWA is for families or individuals to help with personal hardship or distress after a fire.

For more information, contact Department of Communities Disaster Relief Hotline on **1800 032 965** or mail to: [emergencyservices@cpfs.wa.gov.au](mailto:emergencyservices@cpfs.wa.gov.au)

## YOUR WELLBEING

Traumatic experiences such as being involved in a fire can be sudden and overwhelming. It is normal for people to feel unsettled and disrupted for a while. While there may be no signs of physical injury, there can be a serious emotional toll.

Some symptoms can include depression, anxiety, sadness, anger, fatigue, nightmares and difficulty concentrating. If you find you do not return to your normal routine after a few weeks, it is important to seek help from a counsellor or your doctor.

Children can also suffer from stress following a fire. Understanding and recognising your child's responses to these events can assist you in providing support, and help them to cope effectively with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours they are experiencing.

### NORMAL REACTIONS TO A STRESSFUL EVENT

#### Mental reactions:

- Trouble thinking clearly, planning and making decisions
- Cannot concentrate or remember details
- Cannot stop thinking about the fire
- Thinking about other negative things that have happened in the past
- Trouble speaking clearly.

#### Physical reactions:

- Tension, stress and tightness in muscles
- Feeling weak or tired, loss of energy
- Headaches, shaking, sweating, upset stomach or aches and pains
- Loss of appetite or cravings for sugar, alcohol, coffee or cigarettes
- Feeling tired but cannot sleep, disturbed sleep or bad dreams.





- Feeling numb, detached or disconnected
- Irritable, bad tempered or impatient, unable to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed or hopeless
- Sadness and grief, crying easily
- Feelings are easily hurt, overly sensitive to what others say, feeling misunderstood
- Anger or blaming others
- Fear and anxiety, easily startled
- Feeling differently about the people close to you.

Be aware that you have been through an extremely stressful event, and give yourself permission to feel bad and find positive ways to cope. Be more careful than usual, as you are more vulnerable to illness and injury.

- Get plenty of rest, even if you cannot sleep
- Try to eat regular, healthy meals and drink lots of water
- Try to do a little exercise every day, as regular exercise helps reduce the physical effects of trauma
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope. Using alcohol or other drugs to numb the pain will create more problems in the long term. Stimulants such as tea, coffee, caffeinated drinks, chocolate and cigarettes will make the feeling of being hyped up worse
- Make time to relax
- Keep a routine going. Try to include exercise, work and relaxation in your schedule every day. Do one thing you enjoy every day
- It is important for both adults and children to resume normal activities as soon as possible, but do not overdo it
- Avoid making major life decisions too quickly. Focus on making daily decisions to start feeling in control of your life again
- Spend time with people you care about. If you are comfortable talking about your feelings, this can help you with your recovery process. Avoid becoming isolated
- Become involved in community activities.



Most people will recover over time with the support of family and friends. However, sometimes distressing events can be difficult to overcome and professional help may be useful. After a crisis it is often easier to talk to someone who is not involved and is trained to listen. Seeking assistance is not a sign of weakness, it is another strategy that will help you recover.

You should also consider seeking professional help if you:

- Feel very distressed, frightened, irritable or jumpy a lot of the time
- Are unable to carry out your normal roles at work, school or with your family
- Feel hopeless, despairing and think you cannot go on
- Are thinking of harming yourself or someone else.

Your doctor is a good place to start. They can also refer you to other service providers who may be able to help. Charitable organisations that may be able to provide assistance with counselling, support and referrals are:

- **Crisis Care** 9223 1111
- **Lifeline** 13 11 14
- **The Samaritans** 9381 5555

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## NOTES

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## IMPORTANT CONTACTS

## Emergency Services

Life threatening emergencies	000
DFES Public Information Line	13 3337
Emergency WA	<b>emergency.wa.gov.au</b>
State Emergency Services (SES)	132 500

## Utilities

Western Power	<b>13 10 87</b>
Alinta Gas	<b>13 13 58</b>
Water Corporation	<b>13 13 75</b>
Telstra (for residential telephone faults)	<b>13 22 03</b>
Synergy	<b>13 13 53</b>
Horizon (faults and emergencies)	<b>13 23 51</b>

## Services

Australia Red Cross	<a href="https://redcross.org.au">redcross.org.au</a>	1800 246 850
Centrecare		9325 6644
Centrelink		13 28 50
Department of Communities Child Protection and Family Support		
	Disaster Relief Hotline	1800 032 965
	Crisis Care <i>Country free call</i>	1800 199 008
	Central Office	9222 2555
	Central Office <i>Country free call</i>	1800 622 258
Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES)		9395 9300
Department of Communities (Housing Authority)		1800 065 892
Insurance Council of Australia		1300 728 228
Lifeline		13 11 14
RSPCA WA		9209 9300
The Samaritans Helpline		135 247
Wildcare Helpline		9474 9055





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