

DHHS Primary health care providers notification

South West fires – March 2018
23/03/2018

What is the issue?

A fire has been burning in Cobrico, in the Terang area since Saturday 19th March. A number of areas impacted by the fire contain peat, which can burn for long periods and release gases including carbon monoxide. Therefore as a precaution, the CFA and Environment Protection Authority (EPA) are conducting air quality monitoring for carbon monoxide in locations close to the fire as well as in Camperdown. The EPA is also conducting air quality monitoring for fine particles in Cobden, Terang and Camperdown.

Residents in the surrounding area have been relocated and offered assistance at the local relief centre at the Terang Civic Hall. Individual carbon monoxide level testing was offered by Ambulance Victoria and a few people were found to have slightly elevated levels.

The information below has been developed to ensure primary health care providers in this area are aware of the issue and the steps being taken. The Department of Health and Human Services and Ambulance Victoria will continue to work with local providers to ensure a co-ordinated approach to healthcare provision.

Key messages

About carbon monoxide

Carbon monoxide is a colourless and odourless gas. It is found in smoke and is formed from the incomplete combustion of fuels such as peat, wood, coal, charcoal, natural gas, petrol, kerosene, oil, or propane.

When breathed in, carbon monoxide displaces oxygen in the blood and deprives the heart, brain and other vital organs of oxygen.

Very high amounts of carbon monoxide in the body may result in oxygen deprivation, leading to loss of consciousness or death.

The effects of carbon monoxide exposure are reversible in most cases.

However, significant oxygen deprivation may cause tissue damage in organs which require high levels of oxygen such as the brain or the heart. The unborn child is also susceptible to oxygen deprivation from high maternal carbon monoxide exposure.

Who is at risk?

Whether someone develops health effects from exposure to carbon monoxide depends on a number of factors including:

- the levels of carbon monoxide in the environment (from smoke and also other environmental sources)
- how long a person is exposed
- a person's individual susceptibility, for example, having an existing heart or lung condition; having anaemia; being young, elderly or pregnant (the unborn child)
- the level of exercise or physical activity, which increases the amount of air breathed into the lungs (ie breathing rate), and
- other lifestyle factors such as being a smoker.

Symptoms

Carbon monoxide may cause flu-like symptoms such as headache and tiredness, progressing to dizziness, confusion, nausea or fainting.

Prevention

People should limit the amount of time they spend in the affected area, and leave immediately.

What support services are available?

Anyone concerned about their possible exposure to carbon monoxide can visit the Community Health Assessment Centre (Terang Relief Centre, Civic Hall) for a health assessment, or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24 for medical advice. Call 000 in an emergency.

Victoria Police have been door knocking houses that may have been impacted by this fire.

If community need broader support they can contact the VicEmergency hotline on 1300 226 226 or their local council.

Could carbon monoxide exposure affect someone's future health?

The effects of carbon monoxide exposure are reversible in most cases. However, significant oxygen deprivation may cause tissue damage in organs which require high levels of oxygen such as the brain or the heart. The unborn child is also susceptible to oxygen deprivation from high maternal carbon monoxide exposure.

Further information

Please share information available from the following links and follow us on social media for continuing updates.

Air quality information is available from the EPA's AirWatch website:

<http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/our-work/monitoring-the-environment/epa-airwatch>

Information about smoke impacts can be found here:

- For general information on smoke from peat fire please read the [Smoke from Peat Fire factsheet](#)
- For information on carbon monoxide please read the [peat fires in south-west Victoria - carbon monoxide factsheet](#)

Translated fact sheets:

- [Smoke from a peat fire](#)
- [After a fire: returning home safely](#)
- [After a fire: cleaning up a smoke affected home](#)
- [Trauma: reaction and recovery](#)

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Approved by:

Health and Human Services Commander

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