

Emergency planning and response in general practice

Fact sheet: Bushfires in Australia



This fact sheet outlines important information about bushfires in Australia and provides tips for keeping your practice and patients as safe as possible in the event of extreme weather.

Facts about bushfires

- Australia is the most flammable continent on earth.ⁱ
- Extreme fire weather and the length of the fire season is increasing, leading to an increase in bushfire risk.
- Southern and eastern Australia are projected to experience harsher fire weather with weather conditions conducive to fire in the southeast of the continent becoming increasingly more frequent.ⁱⁱ

The role of general practice

General practices in and around fire-prone areas play a significant role in the community's overall response. The RACGP has developed a number of resources to support general practices with preparing for, responding to and recovering from the impact of fires and other emergencies. Access these documents here www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/business/tools/disaster/emergencies/

Tips

Tips for ensuring preparedness for a bushfire

- Develop an up-to-date emergency response plan for your practice.
- Exercise your plan on a regular basis (e.g. as a desk top exercise).
- Contact your local community response coordination organisation to ensure you are a part of community planning processes.
- Contact your local hospital to see how you and other general practices can work with your hospital(s) in emergencies.
- Connect with your state-based response organisation to ensure you are kept up to date with fire-specific information relevant to your location (Click here www.australia.gov.au/content/emergency-links-states-and-territories and select the link for your particular state/territory).
- Contact other practices in your local area and agree on how you can offer mutual support. For example, if your practice is affected by a fire or another emergency and needs to close, you can have a plan in place to direct your patients to a nearby practice until the risk has been averted.
- Have a plan in place to send communications to patients about service disruptions or changes.

Tips to help protect the infrastructure and content of your practice

- Remove excess rubbish, leaves, litter and shrubs from around the practice.
- Remove any unnecessary flammable materials, such as paint, from the premises.
- Clear guttering surrounding the practice.
- Cut the grass and dispose of trimmings regularly.
- Ensure there is a wide firebreak around the practice.
- Remove all tree branches so the building is clear from overhanging branches.
- Install a sprinkler system around the practice.

Health and medical impact of bushfires

Bushfires can cause significant environmental and social health issues and exacerbate existing health conditions. GPs in and around bushfire affected areas may see an increase of people presenting with health issues resulting from:

- radiant heat
- dehydration and heat exhaustion
- smoke inhalation
- burns and other physical trauma
- Exacerbation of respiratory, cardiovascular and renal health conditions.

Resources and information relating to health and medical impacts of bushfires

Australian Family Physician (AFP) article 2009, Bushfires and human health in a changing environment
<https://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/AFP/2009/September/200909johnston.pdf>

Victorian Government, Vic Health, Community fact sheets: Bushfires
<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/natural-disasters/bushfire-factsheets>

Victorian Government Better Health Channel, Smoke and your health.
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bushfiresmoke>

Victorian Government Better Health Channel, Heat stress and heat related illness
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/heat-stress-and-heat-related-illness>

NSW Government, Beat the heat: Information for health professionals
<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/beattheheat/Pages/information-for-health-professionals.aspx>

Victorian Adult Burns Service (Alfred), *Burns Management Guidelines* <http://www.vicburns.org.au/>

Good Practice article 2017, *Environmental impacts: A changing environment*.
<https://www.racgp.org.au/publications/goodpractice/201704/environmental-impacts/>

National Asthma Council Australia, *Bushfires and asthma*
<https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/living-with-asthma/resources/patients-carers/factsheets/bushfires-and-asthma>

Additional resources

RACGP *managing emergencies in general practice resource*
<https://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/e-health/Managing-emergencies-in-general-practice.pdf>

RACGP *managing pandemics in general practice*
<http://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/business/tools/disaster/pandemics/>

General practitioner guide for management of mental health and related consequences in the Victorian bushfires
<http://earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au/resource-centre/disasters-victorian-bushfires>

Psychological support and treatment for victims of Victoria's bushfires
https://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/support_bushfires/

Cranking up the intensity: Climate change and extreme weather events
<https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/cranking-intensity-report>

Bushfire safety for organisations and business – South Australia <http://ccfsa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Fact-sheet-Bushfire-safety-for-organisations-business.pdf>

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1. Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2007, *Splash ABC*, Accessed 13 January 2017 at <http://splash.abc.net.au/home#!/media/31023/?id=31023>
 2. Australian Climate Council 2017, *Cranking up the intensity: Climate change and extreme weather events*, accessed 13 January 2017 at <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/cranking-intensity-report>