

Responding to bushfire emergencies

The following are examples of checklists of what to do during the activation phase of an emergency. The steps outlined can be used in the event of a severe emergency.



AH&MRC
Aboriginal Health & Medical
Research Council of NSW

The following steps can be used in the event of a bushfire.

RESPONSE

STANDBY

ACTION

STANDDOWN

During the days leading up to a bushfire

Activity Monitor the emerging risk

Monitor relevant NSW emergency services and other websites.

- NSW RFS [bushfire map and warnings](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).
- [Fires Near Me](#) app
- NSW SES [warnings](#) or on [Facebook](#) or [X](#).
- [NSW weather warnings](#) from the Bureau of Meteorology.
- Local social media pages.
- Information about [power outages](#).

Check [ABC local radio](#) for alerts, updates, and evacuation centre locations.

Check road conditions and closures at [Live Traffic](#).

Consider discussing the emerging risk with the AH&MRC.

Work collaboratively with the LEMC to identify whether an evacuation centre will be established and if so, ensure centres are culturally safe and responsive.

Activity Prepare your staff and services

Plan alternatives for loss of power, access, communications, and operations.

- Identify and support staff members to work remotely.
- Confirm communications methods with staff and patients e.g. mass-SMS system,
- Confirm communications methods with community e.g. social media
- Assess pre-existing patient appointments and consider telehealth or telephone appointments, or rescheduling appointments to a later date.
- Maintenance of [cold chain](#) for vaccines and critical medications.

Consider staffing plan over the coming period:

- Dedicate a staff member to oversee work rosters. Ensure adequate staffing, allowing for absenteeism in the event of an emergency or illness.
- Consider liaising with other services that are not expected to be affected by the disaster that might be able to supply surge staffing.

Ensure [emergency kits](#) are packed and that batteries/vital equipment is functioning.

Ensure adequate supplies of PPE, medicines, and vaccines stockpiles. Consider necessary items specific to bushfires including dressings/treatment for burns, oxygen, nebulisers, inhalers, IV fluids, painkillers and antibiotics.

Identify whether material aid and emergency relief services are needed and activate [Material Aid plan](#) as required.

Download and print a copy of your business continuity plan and local emergency [bushfire emergency plan](#).

Download and print a copy of your contact lists. Save important contact numbers on your phone.

Download a vulnerable patient list, including a list of medications, and ensure appropriate medical staff have access to the list securely. Consider performing a medicine supply check/issuing repeat prescriptions to ensure that vulnerable patients have a supply of vital medication (such as insulin and anti-epileptic drugs).

Backup data and secure documents.

Prepare communications to staff that can be updated during the emergency, including:

- Links to NSW emergency services and local websites.
 - **Key health messages** and associated health effects of the emergency.
 - Reminders about how to treat and access specialist care for **burns**.
 - Request staff to identify and consider the needs of any vulnerable patients known to them.
 - Remind staff to review their own household emergency and evacuation plans.
 - Determine if any modifications to their work plan are needed e.g. remote working.
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If fire is expected to threaten the ACCHO, prepare the building for an incoming fire:

- Follow your **pre-written bushfire plan** in terms of when to evacuate and how you will do this.
 - If not already done (and if there is time to safely do so):
 - Remove any flammable items from the area around the building (including door mats, wood piles, paint, outdoor furniture, petrol).
 - Remove leaves and debris from gutters/drains
 - Ensure that grass around the ACCHO is short to minimise the risk of it catching fire and setting fire to the building.
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Prepare communications to patients that can be updated during the emergency including:

- Links to NSW emergency services and local websites for up-to-date information.
 - Key health messages about how to **keep healthy during a bushfire**, how to **protect yourself from bushfire smoke** and what to wear during a bushfire to **protect from burns and injury**.
 - Health advice about **returning to a property safely after a bushfire**.
 - Plans for how the ACCHO will operate through the emergency and how to seek help.
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Activity Support your community with their preparations

Inform community of key information regarding the incoming bushfire hurricane:

- Links to NSW emergency services and local websites for up to date information.
 - **Key health messages** as outlined above.
 - Remind community members to prepare or locate their **home emergency plans** for themselves (and **any animals**) and familiarise themselves with any **neighbourhood safer places**.
 - Provide additional information and support to known vulnerable community members.
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Help support the community, where possible, with protecting sites of cultural significance prior to the fire.

Day 0 of the bushfire emergency

Activity Initial response

Always follow advice from emergency services to shelter or evacuate.

Activate your business continuity plan/emergency plan.

If required to evacuate, unplug electrical equipment, shut down the master electrical board, and gas supply, as appropriate.

Collect and distribute your emergency kits.

Notify the AH&MRC of the emergency to facilitate immediate assistance and/or allow AH&MRC to be on standby

Activity Continue to monitor for updates and assess status

Continue to monitor emergency broadcasts for updates.

Participate in any inter-agency meetings and disseminate key information to staff, partners and community.

Assess expected impacts in the coming hours, days, weeks. If community members are cut off from essential services, activate isolation plan.

Consider writing and sharing regular SitReps to represent the impact on your community and its ongoing needs. This document can be updated and used to provide information to key stakeholders.

Review stock of PPE, medicines, vaccines and essential material aid stockpiles and order more in advance as needed.

Activity Manage your staff and services

Provide regular updates to staff:

- Information about the emergency and any additional risks. Refer to NSW emergency services and local websites.
- Reinforce key health messages.
- Consider and identify vulnerable patients known to them.
- Reassess modifications to work plans, including working from home.

Reassess appointment plans. Reschedule or set up telehealth appointments as needed.

Review stock of PPE, medicines, vaccines and essential material aid stockpiles and order more in advance as needed.

Check-in with patients and families on “vulnerable list”

Document and respond to emerging issues. Escalate issues to the AH&MRC if needed.

Activity Support your community

Provide regular updates to community about the emergency:

- Link to NSW emergency services and local websites.
- **Key health messages** and associated health effects bushfires, delivered in an appropriate manner for your community.
- Provide additional information and support to known vulnerable community members.
- Share information from partner organisations, such as location of evacuation centres.

During the bushfire emergency

Activity Monitor the ongoing situation and communicate with other agencies

Continue to attend inter-agency meetings and disseminate key information to staff, partners and community. Communication should include leadership and key contacts during the emergency.

Continue to monitor emergency broadcasts for updates.

Communicate regularly with the AH&MRC committee.

Continue to work in partnership with other organisations and other agencies to find out how to support your community. These include functional agencies as well as material goods agencies/volunteer organisations.

Maintain vigilance for secondary health issues that can occur after a bushfire. Your local public health unit can advise on health protection issues e.g. communicable disease outbreaks or water/air quality concerns.

Activity Manage your staff and services

Continue providing regular updates to staff, patients, and visitors. Implement frequent staff updates/meetings e.g. 5 minute safety check at start and end of the day.

Monitor stock of medicines, first aid and clinic equipment, PPE and basic material aid and replenish these as needed.

Assess the impact of the emergency on staff mental health and provide support, especially if they are personally affected by the emergency, are at risk of vicarious trauma or at risk of burnout.

Assess the impact of the emergency on your service and check rosters and staffing plans align with this. Continually reassess the need to pull in surge staffing if available.

Regularly assess the types of presentations that are occurring as a result of the emergency (injury, mental health, exacerbation of existing conditions). Are current triage processes working? Is infection control working as intended? Have there been any damages to building or equipment?

Activity Support your community

Continue updating the community and reinforcing key messages. Health issues that may arise from bushfires (including effects of evacuations/damage to property) include:

- Injuries, including burns, injuries from falling debris, and injuries when returning to damaged buildings.
- Problems due to air pollution, such as:
 - Asthma or bronchitis/emphysema,
 - Irritation of eyes, sinuses, throat and cough
 - Problems due to small particles that penetrate more deeply and enter the bloodstream.
 - Inhalation of asbestos fibres or other hazardous materials that have burnt
 - Other conditions, including heart attacks and strokes.
- Risk of carbon monoxide poisoning if using cooking/heating devices such as charcoal grills in an area that isn't well ventilated.
- Specific heat related illnesses such as heat exhaustion.
- Contaminated water, due to disruption of clean water supply
- Sanitation problems: Those affected by bushfires should make sure waste is well bagged up to avoid attracting rodents and other vermin. Poison against vermin/insects should be used according to instructions and not stored or set out in reach of children or animals.
- Increased risk of communicable diseases such as respiratory infections, foodborne diseases, and diseases due to overcrowding.

Perform a rapid health needs assessment for your affected community. This includes assessing whether those affected have the following basic requirements for health:²⁰

- Clean water: Each person needs roughly 7.5-15L per day, for drinking, cooking and maintenance of basic hygiene (Sphere standard).
 - Sanitation: In addition to water for personal cleansing, includes soap/cleansing products (and a space to use these safely and with dignity), adequate supply of menstrual products and nappies (and the means to dispose of these safely and discreetly), functioning toilets and toilet paper/sinks/soap/paper towels.
 - Food: An average person needs 2100kCal/day. Consider storage/hygiene issues.
 - Shelter and clothing: Community members may become homeless and rely on shelters or move in with family and friends, risking overcrowding and psychological distress. Emergency **accommodation support** may be needed.
 - Health services: Access to essential medicines, adequate access to drugs, infrastructure, equipment and trained staffing to meet health needs. Is the ACCHO able to respond to current demand or is outside help required? Are current triage processes working?
 - Information: is there adequate information in the community about what is happening and what they need to do to maintain health? This needs to be accessible to the community in terms of language and should be culturally safe.
 - Other: Any emerging concerns e.g. overcrowding, communicable diseases, community tension, experiences of racism from other agencies, animal welfare or safety concerns?
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Monitor for mental health impacts of the emergency that can compound the pre-existing perpetual trauma suffered by Aboriginal people. These might include:

- Anxiety, poor sleep, depression, substance misuse and post-traumatic stress disorder.
 - Financial stress due to loss of home and/or livelihood.
 - Exacerbation of pre-existing mental health diagnoses.
 - Grief due to the destruction of land, shared memories, and sacred places.
 - Distress due to issues encountered including institutionalised racism, exclusion from response and recovery efforts and inequitable decision making.
 - Having to conduct Sorry Business after a disaster and challenges in doing this in the face of ongoing disruption.
 - Consider referral to **mental health** services.
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Be alert to the increased risk of interpersonal and intimate partner violence, which may increase following a disaster.

Record any instances of institutionalised racism and exclusion from response and recovery efforts experienced by community members and liaise with partner agencies about these.

Support families and communities who are conducting Sorry Business during the emergency.

Immediately after the emergency

Activity Returning to work

Continue to monitor emergency broadcasts for updates.

If ACCHO premises have been affected by bushfire, await clearance that it is safe before returning and follow official advice on [how to return safely](#).

Assess the status of resource stockpiles and replenish as appropriate

Recover data and business records.

Repair or replace damaged systems or equipment critical to the clinic.

Arrange a debrief and follow-up sessions with staff as soon as practicable

Activity Assess impact and contact insurer

Assess impact of the emergency on staff:

- Were any staff adversely affected by the emergency?
- What have been the psychological impacts on staff?
- Are rosters for coming weeks appropriate? Do certain staff need extra time off to recover?

Assess impact of the emergency on patients:

- Do missed appointments need to be rescheduled?

Assess damage to buildings, assets, vehicles and equipment

- Record decisions and photos and/or videos of damage in an event log for insurance claims.
- Check the NSW Government [website](#) for advice on clean-up and waste after natural disasters. Contact your local council about kerbside pickup,
- Estimate repair, replacement or relocation costs.
- Lodge your insurance claim early.

Contact your insurer and check your policy before cleaning up, as they may provide cleaning or require photos or authorisation before making repairs. You may wish to check:

- If the insurance policy funds clean-ups, requires authorisation before repairs begins, or provides emergency funds for wages and activities.
- What information is required to complete a claim e.g. event log, photos/video evidence
- Under item 62 of the [General Insurance code of Practice](#), insurers must fast track urgent claims if you can demonstrate financial need.

Activity Support your Community

Continue updating the community and reinforcing key messages, including how to return safely after a bushfire, what to consider when returning and practical/emotional aspects of returning.

Continue to perform health needs assessments to assess status of your community needs.

Remind affected community members to photograph damaged property for insurance purposes (prior to disposal).

Provide information about where community members can go for material, financial and social support.

Provide mental health and trauma support.

Activity Communication

Advise staff of transition to temporary or normal business and clinical arrangements

Thank staff for their engagement and response

Use social media, websites, phone or email to advise patients, visitors and stakeholders about your business and clinical arrangements.

Pandemic diseases

Activate the AH&MRC Pandemic toolkit or ACCHO pandemic plan.

Telephone faults

Our ACCHO's telephone number/s:

Faults should be reported to the ACCHO's telephone system provider:

While the fault is being rectified, redirect all calls to our ACCHO's mobile phone:

Water supply issues

Our ACCHO's water supplier:

The water shut-off valve within the ACCHO is:

The mains water shut-off valve external to the ACCHO is:

For internal plumbing emergencies, contact:

If our ACCHO is without water:

- Portable toilets can be hired from:

- Antibacterial handwash and disposable gloves are:

- Bottled drinking water is:

- Boiling water equipment are:

- Chloridation/iodine tablets are:

Gas supply issues

Our ACCHO's gas provider:

In the event of a gas leak, shut off the valve in:

Contact the gas provider to determine the issue and the estimated timeframe for repairs.

A decision should then be made as to whether the ACCHO can safely remain open or if relocation to an alternative site will be required. See 'ACCHO relocation sites' section below.

Electricity issues and power outages

Our ACCHO's electricity supplier:

Our ACCHO's preferred electrician:

The electrical fuse box is:

Before reporting a power outage, check the safety switch in the fuse box. The emergency torch/es and spare batteries are:

Power outages and vaccines

In the event of short-term power outages, our ACCHO adheres to the [National Vaccine Storage Guidelines](#) and NSW Health's [vaccine storage and cold chain management requirements](#) for the effective management of vaccines which is stored in:

In the event of long-term power outages, our ACCHO has an agreement with [e.g. local pharmacy/hospital] to store vaccines at appropriate temperatures.