# Volcanic activity

## Public Health Information Sheet

## Volcanic ash, gases and fine particles in the air after an eruption can cause eye, skin and breathing problems for people nearby. Ash can be blown by wind impacting people hundreds of kilometres away.

### Key information

**Volcanic ash** is the most likely health hazard for most people as it can travel by wind for long distances.

Those close to an erupting volcano are also at risk from **gases and volcanic smog** (VOG) so take extra care when going outside to wear a mask, goggles and long clothing.

**Volcanic ash or gases require people to stay indoors**. Keep taking your medication if you have asthma or other respiratory or heart conditions.

**Check on your neighbours** and listen to your local radio station for **Civil Defence advice.**

You may need to conserve water

### Watch out for symptoms

Volcanic ash, gas and VOG (volcanic smog containing hazards like sulphur dioxide) can cause a range of symptoms:

* Runny nose.
* Sore throat, sometimes accompanied   
  by dry coughing.
* Airway irritation.
* Uncomfortable breathing, shortness  
  of breath and wheezing.
* Itchy, painful or bloodshot eyes.
* Irritation and reddening of the skin.

**People at increased risk**

Those most at risk include:

* People with asthma.
* Children and babies.
* People with chronic breathing (respiratory) or heart (cardiac) conditions.

Reduce your exposure to ash, gases and chemicals in the air by staying indoors.   
If you have asthma, gases and ash may worsen your symptoms. Take your prevention medication regularly and keep reliever medication with you.

### Keeping safe from volcanic ash

The [Get Ready website](https://getready.govt.nz/emergency/volcanic-activity#e1132) has advice on what   
to do before, during and after ash fall.

**Before ash falls**

* Listen to your local radio station and follow Civil Defence instructions.
* Have cover-up clothing, a fitted N95 or P2 mask if possible, gloves and goggles without side vents.
* Save water in a bathtub or containers as   
  it may become contaminated or cut off.
* If you collect rainwater, disconnect your tank from the downpipes. For people needing assistance with taking these measures, contact whanau, neighbours, volunteers or your local Civil Defence.
* Close windows and doors and seal any gaps with damp towels or tape.

**When ash falls**

* Go home if possible and avoid driving   
  or walking.  
  Stay inside, especially children as masks don’t fit them well enough.
* Keep pets inside until ash is washed away. Brush them before they come in if they do go outside.
* Set up a single-entry point for your house. Place damp towels at the door to prevent ash being tracked indoors.
* Shut off any air conditioning or ventilation units and don’t use dryers or exhaust fans.
* Wear glasses, not contact lenses as trapped ash can scratch your eyes.
* If you go outside, wear cover-up clothing, gloves, a fitted P2 or N95 mask (or surgical mask) and goggles. Remove outdoor clothing outside.
* Wash off any ash on your skin.
* Wash homegrown fruit and vegetables. Avoid eating ash.
* Water restrictions are likely after ash fall. The [Taumata Aromai](https://www.taumataarowai.govt.nz/for-communities/emergencies/boil-water-notice/) website has   
  advice on how to use water for health   
  and hygiene.
* Listen to your local radio station and follow Civil Defence instructions.



### Cleaning up

Please check the [Get Ready website](https://getready.govt.nz/emergency/volcanic-activity#e1132) for instructions on cleaning up ash.

It is important to clean up ash properly as it is a health hazard and can cause damage to buildings and machinery.

* You’ll need to protect your skin with clothing that covers your whole body, sturdy footwear, gloves, goggles and a fitted P2 or N95 mask.
* Vacuum ash up inside and wipe surfaces with damp cloth.
* Moisten ash before cleaning it up outside
* Only connect your roof tank to the downpipe once rain has washed all ash from the roof or you have cleaned it.

### For more information

* On volcanic ash risks and impact areas – [Volcanic ash and impact zones - GNS](https://www.gns.cri.nz/our-science/natural-hazards-and-risks/volcanoes/ash/).
* On fitting a N95 or P2 mask correctly and protecting yourself from ash, gas and VOG – [International Volcanic Health Hazard Network](https://www.ivhhn.org/ash-protection) (IHHHN) website.
* On water shortages and boil water notices - [Taumata Aromai](https://www.taumataarowai.govt.nz/for-communities/emergencies/boil-water-notice/) website.
* Visit <https://info.health.nz/volcanic-activity>.
* [Restoring your property after fire](https://www.fireandemergency.nz/home-fire-safety/in-the-event-of-a-fire/restoring-your-property/) - Fire and Emergency NZ.
* [Making your water safe](https://www.taumataarowai.govt.nz/for-communities/emergencies/treating-water/) – Taumata Arowai.
* **If you are feeling stressed or anxious**   
  you can text or phone 1737 anytime to speak to a trained counsellor for free.