

Your Option to Shelter In Place During a Wildfire

Sheltering in place may be the best way to insure that your home survives a wildfire provided you have properly prepared yourself in advance. This approach first gained prominence during Australia's infamous Ash Wednesday Fire, and has been verified in subsequent research. The fire, which occurred on February 16, 1983 in the States of South Australia and Victoria, was Australia's most devastating fire. Once the smoke cleared, 76 people had died and 2,463 houses and 1,000 farm buildings had been destroyed. Research scientists converged on the fire-ravaged areas to try to understand the fire deaths and the phenomena of structural loss and survival.

The Ash Wednesday fire investigation concluded with a number of explanations for why so many people died. Many victims perished in the fire because even though they recognized the threat, and had enough time to save their lives, they chose an inappropriate survival strategy. Many other victims did not recognize the threat to their lives in time to implement a successful survival strategy. And then some victims were physically incapable of affecting a survival strategy. In most cases, the victims of the fire were caught outdoors with nowhere to shelter themselves safely from the flame front. A key point in this research identifies communication. Victims were unaware of the changes in wind direction or the location of the advancing flame front. Research also demonstrated that the most appropriate survival mechanism would have been to stay indoors. Staying indoors not only saved lives, but was key to structural survival as well.

In the Township of Mount Macedon, the Ash Wednesday fire took six lives and 234 houses. Researchers discovered that at 65 houses (14% of those that survived) where the homeowners were present, the fire did not inflict significant damage. The houses that were attended by homeowners were saved, because once the main fire front passed the homeowners were available to extinguish small spot fires. In many cases, the homeowners salvaged their own homes and those of their neighbors. Unattended houses where the owners returned immediately after the fire front passed over were also saved from total destruction. Personal interviews showed that the able-bodied homeowner played a significant role in structural survivability, and that well-prepared homes provided a safe shelter.

[Click here](#) to view and print a Home Defense Checklist. If you are interested in preparing your home for sheltering in place during a wildfire event, review the checklist carefully. Assuming that you have done everything listed to prepare yourself and your home, you have an excellent chance of saving your home; however, you must be prepared for an emotionally draining experience.

The time to start to prepare your home for sheltering in place is now. Some of the tasks on the Home Defense Checklist require a fair amount of time under stress-free conditions to complete. If you have not prepared your home for defense against a wildfire, you may be risking your life by remaining with your house.