



Frequently Asked Questions about Wildfire Smoke

Is wildfire smoke harmful to my health?

- Wildfire smoke is a mixture of gases and fine particles that can cause a variety of health effects if inhaled in large enough quantities. There are a number of factors that determine if smoke will affect your health, including how much you breathe in, how long you're exposed to smoke, the degree to which you are engaging in physical exertion, and your individual health status.
- Children are generally more sensitive to smoke inhalation than adults because their airways are still developing, they breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults, and they usually spend more time playing outside.
- Elderly adults also tend to be more sensitive to smoke inhalation because they are more likely to have underlying heart and lung diseases and wildfire smoke can exacerbate these conditions.
- Persons of any age with conditions like asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease, or chest pain are especially sensitive to smoke inhalation.

What are the potential health effects of wildfire smoke?

- Smoke can cause a variety of symptoms, including: asthma/COPD attacks, chest pain, coughing, congestion, fatigue, headaches, irritated sinuses, rapid heartbeat, runny nose, scratchy throat, shortness of breath, stinging eyes, and wheezing.

How can I protect myself and my family from the harmful effects of smoke?

- The best thing to do is to limit your exposure to the smoke by staying indoors with the windows and doors closed. Running an air conditioner or air purifier can help keep your indoor air healthy, but make sure that your air purifier is able to remove smoke particles (see: https://www3.epa.gov/airnow/wildfire_may2016.pdf).
- Follow your health care provider's advice about what to do if you have heart or lung disease. If you have a respiratory or heart condition and your symptoms are becoming worse, contact your healthcare provider or call 911.
- Minimize other sources of air pollution by following the following recommendations:
 - Do not smoke or burn anything in the house, including tobacco, candles, or incense
 - Do not use wood/gas/propane stoves
 - Do not fry or broil meat
 - Avoid vacuuming
 - Stock up on food/water/medications to reduce the need to leave your home; buy groceries that do not need to be cooked because cooking can add to indoor air pollution
 - Air out your home to reduce indoor air pollution when outdoor air quality improves

How can I create a clean room at home?

- If you live in an area that is regularly affected by smoke from wildfires, consider creating a "clean room" in an interior room of your home with as few windows and doors as possible. Keep the room as clean as possible and consider keeping an air purifier in the room.

Will I be at risk from smoke if I don't evacuate?

- Generally, evacuations are reserved for situations where the fire is dangerously close to homes, rather than when there is a lot of smoke in the air. If the smoke levels become hazardous, sensitive populations (e.g., people with heart and respiratory diseases) may consider evacuating.

What should I do about closing up my house when it is too hot inside?

- If you do not have an air conditioner and it's too warm to stay inside with the windows closed you may want to seek shelter elsewhere. Public facilities that are equipped with filtration/air purifying systems and air-conditioners, like health clinics, senior centers, schools, or tribal offices, are good options. Persons living in more rural communities may work with the public health center or community health aide to identify a facility.

What kind of mask will help protect me from the smoke?

- In order for a mask to provide protection from smoke, it must be able to filter very small particles (around 0.3 to 0.1 microns) and it must fit in a way that provides an airtight seal around your face.
- Dust masks found at hardware stores are not able to provide the necessary level of filtration, because they're designed to trap large particles (like sawdust).
- Respirator masks, labeled "R95", "N95", or "P95," are helpful in filtering out much of the smoke in the air; however, an airtight seal on the face is very important for these masks to work.
- If you have to be outside for extended periods of time in smoky air, a properly fitted respirator can help reduce your exposure; however, they increase resistance to airflow and can cause increased breathing/heart rates in some individuals.

What should I do if I must go outside or drive?

- Take it easier during smoky times to reduce how much smoke you inhale. If it looks or smells smoky outside, avoid strenuous activities such as mowing the lawn or going for a run.
- Whenever possible, go outside during the least smoky times, and consider using an N95 respirator mask.
- Reduce smoke in your vehicle by closing the windows and vents and running the air conditioner in recirculate mode. Slow down when you drive in smoky conditions.
- Monitor state-issued air quality reports and stay alert to any health warnings related to smoke.
- The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation provides an Air Quality Index (AQI) for different regions of Alaska here: <http://dec.alaska.gov/Applications/Air/airtoolsweb/Advisories>. The AQI tells you about the air quality in your area and gives recommendations to help protect your health.

What do I bring if I am told to evacuate my home?

- If an evacuation is recommended, carefully follow all instructions. Don't forget to bring medications, important documents (like birth certificates, wills, passports, etc.), and enough food and water to last 5–7 days.

What about my pets?

- Your pet can also be affected by smoke in many of the same ways. Smoke can irritate their eyes and respiratory tract, and worsen symptoms in sick animals, so it's a good idea to keep them indoors. If your pet exhibits coughing, red or watery eyes, difficulty breathing, fatigue, stumbling, decreased appetite/thirst, or disorientation, contact a veterinarian.

For more information:

- EPA Wildfire Smoke Factsheet: https://www3.epa.gov/airnow/smoke_fires/reduce-your-smoke-exposure.pdf
- CDC Stay Safe During a Wildfire: <https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/wildfires/duringfire.html>