

# Wildfire smoke and your health

When smoke from a wildfire (such as a forest fire or grassland fire) enters a community, it can cause problems for the people who live there. The biggest health risk comes from small particles in the smoke. These particles can get in your eyes, breathing (respiratory) system, and bloodstream. This can cause:

- burning eyes
- a runny nose
- coughing
- trouble breathing or illnesses like bronchitis

If you have a heart or lung problem, these small particles can make it worse.

## Who is most at risk for health problems from wildfire smoke?

You might have problems earlier and at lower smoke levels if you:

- have heart or lung disease (such as congestive heart failure, angina, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema, asthma)
- is an older adult (especially if you have heart or lung disease)?
- are pregnant
- smoke
- are a child (Smoke can be more harmful to children because their respiratory systems are still developing, they breathe in more air than adults, and they're more likely to be active outside.)
- do heavy outdoor work or outdoor sports

Smoke can also be harmful to **pets**. Try to keep your pets inside as much as possible and make sure they have lots of water. If your pet has trouble breathing, contact your vet.

## If smoke is a problem where I live, what can I do to lower my health risk?

If smoke is a problem in your community, stay inside as much as possible and keep all windows and doors closed. Here is what else you can do to keep your indoor air clean:

- Close fresh air intakes from furnaces, fireplaces, or stoves.
- Turn on your air conditioning if you have it and set it to recirculate. Keep it running to help filter the air and keep your family cool. (Just remember that some air conditioning systems do not filter the air or improve indoor air quality.)
- If you have room air cleaners with high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters, turn them on. Do not use air cleaners that may produce ozone. For portable air cleaners, follow all the manufacturer's instructions for changing the filter, where to place the device, and the size of room it is meant to be used in.
- Use humidifiers, which might help remove some of the smoke. The humid air can also help keep your nose and mouth moist.

- Do not use wood stoves, gas stoves, or candles because they make the indoor air quality worse. If you can, prepare foods that you do not have to cook. Cooking (especially frying and broiling) can affect the air quality in your home.
- Do not use spray air fresheners or electric fragrance dispensers because they can affect air quality.
- Do not vacuum because it stirs up particles that are already inside your home.
- Do not let anyone smoke, vape, or use e-cigarettes in your home.

## What can I do if it is too warm inside my home?

When you keep doors and windows closed to keep smoke out and you do not have air conditioning, your house might get very warm. If you need to cool down, you could visit a place that is more air-tight with cooler filtered air. Examples include a shopping mall, library, community center, or movie theatre.

If you can't leave your home, watch for signs of [heat-related illness](#) like heat exhaustion or heatstroke. Turn on the furnace fan or standalone fans to move air around in your home. If the air quality gets better for a short time, you can air out your home by opening doors and windows for a bit.

## How can I stay aware of what is going on in my community?

When wildfire smoke is in your community, regularly check for air quality updates on local media (T.V., radio, or online). If you have neighbors, friends, or relatives who live alone, check on them to make sure they are OK.

## What if I need to leave my home?

When the air quality is poor and you are in your vehicle, keep the windows closed. Put the air system on recirculate so smoky air does not get inside. When driving through an area with low or no smoke, switch the circulation system to let outside air into your vehicle.

If you need to leave your community, only think about leaving if it is safe to travel and you are going somewhere that's likely to have less smoke.

If you are in the wildfire area, be ready to evacuate. Follow **all** public service announcements. [Build an emergency kit](#) and have it ready.

## Can wearing a mask help protect me from smoke?

Most masks you can buy at stores do not protect you from smoke. The harmful particles are so small that they can go around or through the mask. An N95 mask, properly worn, offers some protection. It is best to stay inside with the windows and doors closed instead of relying on a mask to protect you from smoke.

## Can I still be active when there's wildfire smoke in the air?

Pay attention to the local [air quality health index \(AQHI\)](#). Adjust your activities according to the AQHI messages. Move outdoor activities indoors and keep your indoor air as clean as possible. Reschedule or cancel outdoor events (such as sports or competitions) if smoke levels are too high.

When you are outside, do not do any heavy activity or exercise. Heavy activity and exercise can make you breathe 10 to 20 times more than you do while you're resting. Stop or slow down if what you are doing makes you cough or feel tired.

Drink lots of water to stay hydrated. This will keep your nose and mouth moist, which makes it easier to breathe. This is important when you are inside and outside.

When there is a lot of haze in the air, do not let your children play outside for a long time.

## Do I follow the same health and safety measures for other types of fires (such as building, factory, and landfill fires)?

In most cases, health, and safety measures for other types of fires are the same as for wildfires. But you may need to take different measures if other types of fires cause more chemicals in the smoke. For example, you may be told to [shelter-in-place](#) (stay indoors and don't leave unless you're told to). Check your local media and follow all public service announcements.

## What if I start to feel unwell?

When there's wildfire smoke where you live, pay close attention to your health, especially if you have heart or lung problems. Take all your regular medicines. It is a good idea to have a week's supply of medicine with you. Do everything your healthcare provider told you to do and contact your healthcare provider if you have any health concerns, even if you do not have heart or lung problems.

If you have chest tightness, chest pain, shortness of breath, or another health emergency, **call 911** or go to the nearest emergency department right away. For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call [Health Link](#) at 811.