

SMOKE & YOUR HEALTH

Frequently Asked Questions

What's in smoke from a wildfire?

Smoke is made up particles, gases and water vapor. Water vapor makes up the majority percent of smoke. The remainder is carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxide, irritant volatile organic compounds, air toxics and very small particles.

Is smoke bad for me?

Yes. It's a good idea to avoid breathing smoke if you can help it. If you are healthy, you usually are not at a major risk from smoke. But there are people who are at risk, including people with heart or lung diseases, such as congestive heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema or asthma. Children and the elderly also are more susceptible to smoke.

What can I do to protect myself?

- Many communities report EPA's Air Quality Index (AQI) for *particulate matter, or PM*. PM (tiny particles) is one of the biggest dangers from smoke. As smoke gets worse, that index changes — and so do guidelines for protecting yourself. So listen to local air quality reports.
- Use common sense. If it looks smoky outside, it's probably not a good time to go for a run. And it's probably a good time for your children to remain indoors.
- If you're advised to stay indoors, keep your windows and doors closed. Run your air conditioner, if you have one. Be sure to keep the fresh air intake closed and the filter clean.
- Help keep particle levels inside low by avoiding using anything that burns, including wood stoves and gas stoves if possible. And don't smoke. That just puts even more pollution in your lungs — and those of the people around you.
- If you have asthma, be sure to take your medicines, as prescribed by your doctor. If you're supposed to measure your peak flows, make sure you do. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

How can I tell if smoke levels are dangerous if I don't live near a monitor?

Generally, the worse the visibility, the worse the smoke. For a guide for estimating visibility and associated health effects, go to <http://www.deq.state.mt.us/FireUpdates/index.asp>.

For links to air quality data go to www.deq.state.id.us/air/air1.htm.

How do I know if smoke is affecting me?

You may have a scratchy throat, cough, irritated sinuses, headaches, runny nose and stinging eyes. Children and people with lung diseases may find it difficult to breathe as deeply or vigorously as normally, and they may cough or feel short of breath. People with diseases such as asthma or chronic bronchitis may find their symptoms worsening.

Should I leave my home because of smoke?

The tiny particles in smoke do get inside your home. If smoke levels are high for a long period of time, these particles can build up, causing you problems even indoors. If you have symptoms indoors (coughing, burning eyes, runny nose, etc.), talk with your doctor or call your county health department. This is particularly important for people with heart or respiratory diseases, the elderly and children.

Are the effects of smoke permanent?

Healthy adults generally find that their symptoms (runny noses, coughing, etc.) disappear after the smoke is gone.

Do dust masks help?

Paper "comfort" or "nuisance" masks are designed to trap large dust particles — not the tiny particles found in smoke. These masks generally will not protect your lungs from wildfire smoke.

Do air filters help?

They do. Indoor air filtration devices with HEPA filters can reduce the levels of particles indoors. Make sure to change the filter regularly. **Don't** use an ozone-generating air cleaner. That puts more pollution in your home.

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For more information, call 406-329-3493. August 2000*