

Protect Yourself: Wildfire Smoke Safety

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Wildfire smoke contains a complex mixture of air pollutants – is unhealthy to breathe and can be especially dangerous for the elderly, pregnant women, and people with chronic respiratory and heart conditions. Infants and children are also at a higher risk as they breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults, and wildfire smoke can irritate their still-developing lungs. Pets also can be affected by unhealthy air and should be brought indoors, if possible.

There are several steps you can take now to keep your family safe before and during wildfire season.

Check local air quality. As smoke gets worse, the concentration of particles in the air increases – and so should the steps you take to protect yourself. Air quality changes by the minute during wildfires. Get the latest information from air monitors and sensors near you by visiting the AirNow Fire and Smoke Map.

Use common sense to guide your activities. Even if you don't have a monitor in your area, if it looks or smells smoky outside, it's probably not a good time to mow the lawn or go for a run. It's also not a good time for children – especially children with asthma – to be active outdoors, especially for prolonged periods of time. If you are active outdoors, pay attention to symptoms, which could be an indication that you need to go inside and get away from the smoke.

Cloth masks and surgical masks aren't enough! While cloth face coverings offer protection against COVID-19, they do not provide protection against smoke particles. People who must be outdoors in areas with heavy smoke or where ash is disturbed may want to wear a NIOSH-certified N95 respirator mask. Those with existing respiratory, lung or heart conditions should limit their exposure by staying indoors. Since wearing a respirator can make it harder to breathe, those with lung or heart conditions should consult their doctor.

If possible, stay indoors and take steps to keep indoor air as clean as possible. Keep your windows and doors closed when the air is smoky. Run your central air conditioner on recirculate mode if possible. Use a new air filter with a MERV rating as high as your system can handle, based on the manufacturer's recommendation. A MERV rating of 13 or higher is the most effective at filtering smoke. Replace air filters when dirty. Open windows to air out the house when air quality improves. Never run swamp coolers or house fans when air quality is poor. If you don't have air conditioning, consider using a portable air cleaner to further reduce impacts from smoke. Note: If you don't have an air conditioner or purifier, staying inside with the windows closed may be dangerous in extremely hot weather. In these cases, seek alternative shelter, such as with relatives or at a clean air center.

Help reduce other particulate matter inside. When smoke is heavy for a prolonged period, fine particles can build up indoors even though you may not be able to see them. Try to avoid using anything that burns, such as wood fireplaces, gas logs,

and even candles. Make sure your hood fan is on if you must use a gas stove. Avoid using your vacuum, which can stir up particles already inside your home.

Build a temporary box fan filter. These devices should only be used if other air cleaning options are unavailable. Never leave the device unattended. Only use box fans manufactured in or after 2012 – these fans will have a fused plug, which will prevent electrical fires if the device is knocked over. Attach a high-efficiency air filter (MERV 13 rating or higher) to the back of the fan using duct tape or a bungee cord, with the arrow printed on the filter pointing toward the fan (in the same direction as the airflow). Close all windows and doors when the box fan filter is being used. Change the air filter when it gets dirty. Watch this instructional video.

If you have asthma or another lung disease, make sure you follow your healthcare provider's directions about taking your medicines and following your asthma action plan. Have at least a five-day supply of medication on hand. Call your healthcare provider if your symptoms worsen.

If you have cardiovascular disease, follow your healthcare provider's directions and call if your symptoms worsen. If you think you are having a heart attack or stroke, dial 9-1-1.

For more information on protecting yourself from wildfire smoke, visit: <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/protecting-yourself-wildfire-smoke>.

