

Protect Your Health During Wildfires

Smoke from wildfires can harm anyone nearby and even many miles downwind. Breathing smoke can shorten lives and cause heart attacks, asthma attacks and other dangerous health effects. Even healthy adults can risk coughing, wheezing, and difficulty breathing.

Preparation for wildfires

Before a wildfire occurs

Preparation is key to protecting your family, especially if you live where wildfire risk is high. Here are some steps to take:

- Know how you will get alerts and health warnings about high fire risk or an active fire. Contact your local authorities how to sign up for alerts.
- Before fire season begins, make sure you have extra food, water, and medications on hand to last for several days so that you don't need to go out during the event.
- Designate a clean room in your home. That room may need a properly-sized air purifier with a HEPA filter to further reduce particles coming from the outside.
- Understand what plans your workplace, or your child's school or day care center has in place when wildfires occur.
- If you think you'll need to be outside during the fire, consider getting disposable respirator masks that are rated as N95 or higher to help reduce inhalation of particle pollution. These masks must fit securely to work. They do not work for children or people with beards. Do not use dust masks or surgical masks because they do not filter out harmful particles. Go [here](#) to learn how to wear an N95 mask.

Talk with your doctor

Talk with your doctor about how to prepare for this smoke, especially if you or someone in the family fits into one of these categories: works outdoors; is under age 18 or over age 65; is pregnant; or has asthma, COPD or other lung diseases, cardiovascular disease, or diabetes.

Have asthma, COPD or other lung diseases?

- Follow your doctor's orders for treatment and medications. Make sure you have a management plan to keep your best health. Ask your doctor to prepare one for you. Learn more about these plans [here](#) and [here](#). Keep all your medicines and tools, like peak flow meters, ready to go.
- If you use supplemental oxygen, get an alternative and portable source of power in case the electricity goes out. Tell your electricity provider to put you on a priority list for restoring power.



Coordinating Partners:



American Association for Respiratory Care

Smoke from wildfires can harm anyone nearby and even many miles downwind.



Evacuation Planning

No one wants to evacuate, but it's always a possibility. You should prepare for evacuation, especially if you live in an area at higher risk from wildfires.

- Follow instructions of local authorities. Make sure your neighbors and friends know what to do.
- Keep supplies of medicines and breathing equipment ready. Make a good checklist to make sure you don't forget anything.
- Gather prescriptions and insurance cards along with your treatment plan so you are ready to go.
- If needed, make sure you have portable electric power for any medical equipment or devices. You can recharge some devices in your car, but that may not work in all situations.

When the wildfire happens

Here are some key steps you should do to help stay safe and protect your lungs from wildfire smoke:

- Stay aware of the air quality where you live and where you may travel. Check the local news and weather reports for information. Check the Air Quality Index available at airnow.gov to see about current forecasts for unhealthy air.
- Stay indoors as much as possible with windows and doors closed and dampers shut.
- Tuck damp towels along the bottom of doors and windows to block outdoor air. Use your clean room with the air purifier running.
- Run your air conditioner on "recirculate" to help filter out some of the particles coming indoors from outside. Keep the fresh-air intake closed. Do not run evaporative "swamp coolers" or whole house fans (which pull outdoor air inside).
- Seek shelter elsewhere if you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed.
- Don't make indoor air quality worse. Do not allow anyone to smoke indoors. Do not burn anything indoors, including wood or candles. Do not vacuum anywhere in the house.
- When traveling in a vehicle, keep windows closed, run the air conditioner, and set air to recirculate to reduce smoke.

Following the fire

- Protect yourself. Ash or dust can contain many harmful chemicals in addition to the dangerous particles themselves. People with lung or heart diseases should avoid cleanup activities where dust or soot is present.
- Cover your face: Wear an appropriate dust mask during clean-up, a HEPA-filtered one or a fitted N-95.
- Thoroughly wet dusty and sooty area prior to clean-up. This will help to reduce the amount of particles becoming airborne.
- If exposure to asbestos or other hazardous materials is suspected, do not disturb the area. Dust masks do not protect against asbestos.

This issue brief was supported by Grant Number 6NU38OT000292-01, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services.



Coordinating Partners:



American Association
for Respiratory Care



For more
information, go to
Lung.org/wildfires
and contact your
state or local
health department.