Wildfire Smoke and your Health
DPHHS Talking Points

If possible, limit your exposure to smoke.
Here are 7 tips to help you protect your health:

1. **Pay attention to local air quality reports.** Watch for news or health warnings about smoke. Pay attention to public health messages and when advised, take extra safety measures such as avoiding spending time outdoors. Go to www.todaysair.mt.gov for a link to air quality reports.

2. **Pay attention to visibility guides.** Although not every community measures the amount of particles in the air, there are guidelines to help people estimate air quality based on how far they can see. Go to www.todaysair.mt.gov for a link to visibility guides.

3. **If you are told to stay indoors, stay indoors and keep your indoor air as clean as possible.** Keep windows and doors closed unless it is very hot outside. Run an air conditioner if you have one, but keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside. Seek shelter elsewhere if you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed.

4. **Do not add to indoor pollution.** When smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles and fireplaces. Do not vacuum, because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home. Do not smoke tobacco or other products, because smoking puts even more pollution into the air.

5. **Follow your doctor's advice about medicines and about your respiratory management plan if you have asthma or another lung disease.** Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

6. **Do not rely on dust masks for protection**. Surgical masks or dust masks commonly found at hardware stores trap large particles. These masks will not protect your lungs from smoke. An “N95” mask, properly worn, will offer some protection. If you decide to keep a mask on hand, see the Respirator Fact Sheet provided by CDC’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Filtering face-piece respirators and masks can make the work of breathing more difficult and can lead to increased breathing rates and heart rates. They can also contribute to heat stress. Because of this, respirator use by those with heart and respiratory diseases should only be done under a doctor’s supervision. A wet towel or bandana is not recommended either. While they may stop large particles, fine ones that can still get into the lungs.

7. **Avoid smoke exposure during outdoor recreation.** Before you travel to a park or forest or outdoor event, check air quality reports for the areas you are traveling to and confirm the event has not been cancelled.

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Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the health threat from wildfire smoke?
A: Smoke from wildfires is a mixture of gases and fine particles from burning trees and other plant materials known as particulate matter (PM). Smoke and the PM it contains can irritate your eyes or your respiratory system and worsen chronic heart and lung diseases. How much and how long you are exposed to the smoke, as well as your age and degree of susceptibility, play a role in determining whether or not you are likely to experience smoke-related health problems. If you are experiencing serious medical problems for any reason, seek medical treatment immediately.

Q: How can I protect myself and my family from the harmful effects of smoke?
A: The best thing to do is to limit your exposure to the smoke. Strategies to decrease exposure to smoke include staying indoors whenever possible, using air conditioners (air conditioned homes usually have lower air exchange rates than homes that use open windows for ventilation), using mechanical air cleaners, keeping windows closed while driving in a vehicle, and minimizing other sources of air pollution such as smoking tobacco, using wood burning stoves, burning candles or incense, and vacuuming. Drinking lots of water can help keep your airways moist, which may reduce symptoms of scratchy throat and coughing.

Q: How can I tell if the smoke is affecting me or my family?
A: Even someone who is healthy can get sick if there is enough smoke in the air. Breathing in smoke can have immediate health effects, including: coughing, trouble breathing normally, stinging eyes, scratchy throat, runny nose, irritated sinuses, wheezing and shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, an asthma attack, tiredness, and fast heartbeat. Older adults, pregnant women, children, and people with preexisting respiratory and heart conditions may be more likely to get sick if they breathe in wildfire smoke.

Q: What should I do about closing up my house when it is so hot in there?
A: If it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed and you do not have an air conditioner, seek alternative shelter by visiting family members, neighbors, or public buildings that have air conditioning. You may also spend a few hours visiting an air-conditioned location such as a mall, movie theater, or library.

Q: Our community has an outdoor game scheduled this evening. Should we cancel it?
A: All persons in areas affected by heavy wildfire smoke should consider limiting outdoor activity and staying indoors whenever possible to minimize exposure to the smoke. In settings of prolonged, heavy exposure to wildfire smoke, public health departments and local air quality authorities may recommend canceling such activities. Stay tuned to your local news for the latest information. Use the recommendations for when to cancel outdoor sporting events found online.

To view the wildfire public health messaging toolkit in its entirety, visit todaysair.mt.gov

Montana Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion Bureau

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