

Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

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Wildfire smoke and your health

When wildfire smoke enters a community, it can cause problems for the people who live there. Smoke contains small particles, which are a big health risk. These particles can get in your eyes, breathing (respiratory) system, and bloodstream. They can cause:

- burning eyes
- a runny nose
- coughing
- trouble breathing or illnesses such as bronchitis.

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

Stay inside as much as possible and keep all windows and doors closed. Here's what else you can do to keep your indoor air clean:

- Close fresh air intakes from furnaces, fireplaces, or stoves.
- If you have air conditioning, turn it on 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 don't filter the air or improve indoor air quality.)
- If you have room air cleaners with high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters, turn them on. Don't 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's meant to be used in.
- Use humidifiers, which may remove some of the smoke. The humid air can also help keep your nose and mouth moist.
- Don't use wood stoves, gas stoves, or candles because they make the indoor air quality worse. If you can, prepare foods that you don't have to cook. Cooking (especially frying and broiling) can affect the air quality in your home.
- Don't use spray air fresheners or electric fragrance dispensers because they can affect air quality.
- Don't vacuum because it stirs up particles that are already inside your home.
- Don't let anyone smoke, vape, or use e-cigarettes in your home.

What can I do if it's too warm inside my home?

When you keep doors and windows closed to keep smoke out and you don't have air conditioning, your house may 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 centre or movie theatre.

If you can't leave your home, watch for signs of heat-related illness such as 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, you can air out your home by opening doors and windows.

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.

How can I stay aware of what's going on in my community?

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

What if I need to leave my home?

- If you are in your vehicle, and the air quality is poor, keep the windows closed.
- Put the air system on recirculate so smoky air doesn't 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're in the wildfire area, be ready to evacuate. Follow all public service announcements.
- Create an emergency kit and have it ready by the door.

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) if smoke levels are too high. Don't do any heavy activity or exercise outside. 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're 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're inside and outside.
- When there is a lot of haze in the air, don't let your children play outside for a long time.
- If you have heart or lung problems, the smoke can make it worse. 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.