Bushfire smoke

Summary

Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas and may affect people's health.

Bushfire smoke can affect you and your family's health, and there are actions that you can take to avoid or reduce potential health effects.

Bushfire smoke

Bushfire smoke is a mixture of different-sized particles, water vapour and gases, including carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides. The larger particles contribute to the visible haze when a fire is burning. They are generally too large to be breathed deeply into the lungs, but can irritate your nose and throat.

Finer microscopic particles and gases are small enough to be breathed deep into the lungs and can cause health problems.

Bushfire smoke can affect your health

How smoke affects you depends on your age, existing medical conditions such as asthma or heart disease, and the length of time you are exposed to the smoke.

Signs of smoke irritation include itchy eyes, sore throat, runny nose, coughing and wheezing. Healthy adults who have a short exposure to smoke usually find that these symptoms clear up once they are away from the smoke.

Children, the elderly, smokers and people with pre-existing illnesses such as heart or lung conditions (including asthma) are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in fine particles. Symptoms may worsen and include wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing.

It is very important that people with pre-existing health conditions take their medication, follow their treatment plan and seek immediate medical advice if symptoms persist.

Protecting your health

- Avoid physical activity outdoors (exercise causes more fine particles to be breathed deeper into the lungs). People with pre-existing lung or heart conditions in particular, should rest as much as possible and keep away from the smoke.
- Anyone with a heart or lung condition should follow the treatment plan advised by their doctor and keep at least five days supply of medication on hand.
- People with asthma should follow their personal asthma plan.
- When smoke is in the air, but a fire is not directly threatening you, stay indoors and close all windows and doors.
- If you operate an air conditioner during smoky conditions, switch it to ‘recycle’ or ‘recirculate’ to reduce smoke coming inside your home.
- If you do not have an air conditioner, take steps to reduce heat stress especially the very young, and people who are unwell or elderly. Information on staying healthy in the heat is available at betterhealth.vic.gov.au
If your home gets too hot to be comfortable, or is letting in outside air, try to take an air-conditioned break at a local community library or shopping centre.

If there is a break in smoky conditions, take the opportunity to air out your home to improve indoor air quality.

When indoors, minimise other sources of air pollution such as cigarette smoke, burning candles, using unflued gas appliances or woodstoves and stirring up fine dust from sweeping or vacuuming.

During extended, very smoky conditions, people who are sensitive to smoke should consider temporarily staying with a friend or relative living outside the smoke-affected area. Outdoor sporting events may also be postponed by event organisers.

Facemasks and bushfire smoke
Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine particles from bushfire smoke and are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.

Special masks (called ‘P2’) filter bushfire smoke, providing a greater protection against inhaling fine particles. They are available at most hardware stores.

However, before deciding to wear a mask you should understand that:

- They can be hot and uncomfortable to wear
- They can make it harder for you to breathe normally – anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition should seek medical advice before using them
- If the seal around the face and mouth is poor, the mask is much less effective (men should be clean shaven to get a good seal)
- The masks do not filter out gases such as carbon monoxide
- It is better to stay indoors, away from the smoke, unless you cannot avoid working outdoors.

Bushfire smoke and your safety
If you see smoke haze, check for fire warnings in your area:

- Listen to your local radio station for updates
- Visit the Country Fire Authority Victoria website.
- Call the VicEmergency Hotline on 1800 226 226 (National Relay Service on 1800 555 677). If you don’t speak English, call the Translating and Interpreting Service on 131 450).

Bushfire smoke and health
If you or anyone in your family is experiencing symptoms that may be due to bushfire smoke exposure, seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

Anyone experiencing difficulty breathing or chest pain should seek urgent medical assistance – phone 000.

For further information about asthma go to the Asthma Foundation of Victoria’s website or call 1800 278 462

Air quality and bushfire smoke
For information on air quality and smoke impacts from bushfires, visit the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) Victoria website or call EPA on 1300 372 842

Where to get help
- Your doctor
- Your local community health service
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24
- VicEmergency Hotline Tel: 1800 226 226
• Your local council’s Environmental Health Section

• **Country Fire Authority** – for current fire information. (Twitter – @CFA_Updates and Facebook – CFA)

• **VicEmergency app** – for alerts and info on fires, floods, storms, earthquakes, beach closures and water safety.

• **Environment Protection Authority Victoria** – for information about air quality in bushfire areas

• **Environmental Health**, Department of Health Victoria for information on bushfires and your health

**Download posters**

• **Smoky outside stay inside (PDF, 100 KB)** - If you are not under threat from a fire, avoid breathing smoke by staying inside

• **Smoky outside protect your health (PDF, 348 KB)** - Tips to protect your health from bushfire smoke

• **Smoke from fires - plan ahead and protect your health (PDF, 140 KB)** - Tips to plan ahead and protect your health from bushfire smoke

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