

Smoke and Air Quality and Health

Marsh fires generate smoke that can travel great distances from the location of the fire. Atmospheric conditions influence where the smoke goes and how long it takes to dissipate. People with respiratory diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma and other breathing problems should avoid the smoke by staying indoors.

What is smoke?

Smoke is produced during the burning of grasses, trees, branches and other vegetation in the marshes. It is composed of particulate matter and gases, primarily carbon dioxide. Smoke rises into the air and can travel long distances. The particulates in smoke range from large particles that you can see to very tiny particulates that are not visible to the naked eye.

What happens to the smoke?

Smoke from the fires travels through the air and it is diluted in air as it moves away from the fire locations. Some particles in the smoke may travel long distances from the fire. You may not even see them in the air. You may smell the smoke when it is in the air.

Who is most sensitive to smoke?

Young children and people with chronic respiratory disease, such as asthma, emphysema or bronchitis, are more sensitive to smoke. People with cardiovascular disease and breathing problems also may be affected. People with these diseases may experience increased difficulty in breathing when smoke is in the air.

Will smoke harm my health?

Smoke may irritate the eyes, nose and throat. The smaller particles may get into the lower respiratory tract. In healthy people, smoke may be an irritant with reversible effects that disappear after a few days. In people with breathing problems such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis, smoke may trigger

asthma attacks, make allergies worse and make breathing harder.

What do I do to prevent these effects?

Stay indoors and keep windows and doors closed. Run an air conditioner if you have one, but keep the fresh-air intake closed. Also, change your filter often. If you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed, seek shelter elsewhere. Watch for changes in the wind direction. Sensitive individuals should limit prolonged outdoor activities. Make sure to take your medications as directed by your doctor. Contact your doctor if you have health concerns.

What do I do to prevent these effects?

Individuals with asthma, allergies, and other respiratory conditions should avoid prolonged outdoor exposure, continue to follow their treatment plans as determined by their health care providers, be certain their prescriptions are filled and have their medications with them. Individuals who become symptomatic should seek medical advice from their health care provider.

People who live in an area affected by smoke from wildfires should create or may benefit from creating a “clean room” in their home. A good choice is an interior room, with as few windows and doors as possible, such as a bedroom. Some suggestions for maintaining a clean room:

- ▶ Keep windows and doors closed.
- ▶ Set up a properly sized room air cleaner, which will help remove particles from the air while emitting minimal or no levels of ozone.
- ▶ Run an air conditioner or central air conditioning system if you have one. If the air conditioner provides a fresh air option, keep the fresh-air intake closed to prevent smoke from getting inside. Make sure that the filter is clean enough to allow good air flow indoors.

Smoke and Air Quality and Health **FACTS** *(continued)*

- ▶ Do not vacuum, because vacuuming stirs up particles.
- ▶ Do not smoke or burn anything, such as candles or incense, anywhere in the house.
- ▶ Keep the room clean.
- ▶ If it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed, or if you are very sensitive to smoke, seek shelter elsewhere. Keep in mind that many particles will enter your home even if you take all of these steps.

Stay indoors and watch for changes in the wind direction. Sensitive individuals should limit prolonged

outdoor activities. Make sure to take your medications as directed by your doctor. Contact your doctor if you have health concerns.

Will wearing a single strap or surgical mask help protect you?

Masks will provide little if any protection and may complicate respiratory conditions if used inappropriately.

For more information, call the Louisiana Department of Health & Hospitals at 1-888-293-7020.

For more information, visit www.dhh.la.gov.

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