

WILDFIRE SMOKE INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH PARTNERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

STATEMENT:

Wildfire smoke is a [complex mixture of different air pollutants](#) and is an important health concern for our region. [Island Health](#), [First Nations Health Authority](#) and [Health Emergency Management BC](#) have joined together to provide this resource to all of our communities as smoke impacts us all. Reducing exposure to wildfire smoke is the best way to protect health.

Over the last decade a [BC Health and Smoke Exposure Coordination Committee](#) has coordinated planning and response efforts related to public health impacts for significant wildfire smoke events.

You can follow air quality by monitoring the [Air Quality Health Index](#) and signing up for [AQHI alerts](#).

THOSE MOST VULNERABLE TO WILDFIRE SMOKE:

Infants	Pregnant people
Small Children	People with Asthma, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, Heart Disease, Diabetes
Older Adults	People with low socioeconomic status

SIGNS OF WILDFIRE SMOKE-RELATED ILLNESS:

Mild	More Severe
Eye irritation, runny nose, sore throat, wheezing, mild cough, headaches	Shortness of breath, bad cough, dizziness, chest pain, fast beating/fluttering heart
SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION	

HOW TO PREPARE FOR WILDFIRE SEASON:

1. Consider developing a [wildfire smoke response plan](#) and provide training to staff and volunteers to ensure they know what to do to protect their clients, students, the public and themselves during wildfire smoke events.
2. Prepare staff and volunteers to recognize the signs of illness from wildfire smoke exposure and to know when to seek medical care.
3. Check the [Air Quality Health Index](#) (AQHI) or other real-time air quality data such as [Smoky Skies Bulletin](#), interactive [smoke forecast](#) mapping and [AQHI maps](#).

4. Improve the indoor air quality of your facility:
 - a. Ensure the building's Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) system is well-maintained and functioning, and that the filters are in good working order. Use the highest-rated minimum efficiency reporting value (MERV) filter possible; ideally MERV 13 or higher. Consider making building ventilation systems High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filter-ready, so that during a wildfire smoke event existing filters can switch to the upgraded filter for the event's duration. Ensure all filters are properly maintained and replaced.
 - b. For older buildings, [portable air cleaners with HEPA filtration may be an option](#). Ensure the filter is suitable for the room size and avoid air cleaners that produce ozone.
 - c. [Filtration in institutional settings](#) can be considered to support clients in the community.
 - d. Air cleaners work best when windows and doors are closed, so heat may become an issue on days that are also hot. Energy efficient active cooling systems (e.g. ductless heat pumps or air conditioners) may be needed in addition to the air cleaner to create a cool space with clean air.
5. Consider what [individual actions](#) you can take to address climate change

WHAT DO TO DURING A WILDFIRE SMOKE EVENT

1. Smoke levels differ from place to place and can change quickly, so monitor the AQHI closely through the [provincial page](#) or [app](#).
2. Monitor clients / students for signs of illness, and ensure everyone drinks plenty of water and stays cool.
3. Ensure clients / students with chronic health conditions (e.g. asthma) follow their care plan, have any necessary medications on hand and seek additional advice from their physician if needed.
4. Reduce outdoor activity during periods of poor air quality.
 - a. When the AQHI is in the VERY HIGH category, consider moving activities requiring intense physical activity (e.g. physical education classes, outdoor sports, outdoor workers) to indoor spaces or canceling them.
 - b. When it is smoky outside, generally clients / students should be permitted to remain indoors if they wish, but low-intensity outdoor time is typically safe.
5. Improve indoor air quality as much as possible.
 - a. Consider keeping windows and doors closed during high smoke times; however, make sure that indoor temperatures can be maintained at a comfortable level to prevent heat-related illnesses.
 - b. Ensure the building's HVAC is well-maintained and functioning, and filters are in good working order. Use the highest rated MERV filter possible (MERV 13 or higher).

- c. Consider using appropriately sized portable HEPA filters for individual rooms if suitable HVAC is not available.
6. [Simple one-layer cloth masks bandanas, gaiters, etc.](#), offer no protection whether wet or dry.

DUAL WILDFIRE SMOKE AND EXTREME HEAT EVENT

Overheating is generally a bigger risk to health than smoke inhalation. Many people are at risk of potential severe injury and death if they overheat, while a much smaller proportion are at risk of severe acute respiratory or cardiovascular attack. Individuals most at risk from smoke are also at risk from heat. Therefore, most people should prioritize staying as cool as possible in very hot weather.

Both heat and smoke are important environmental exposures and their risks may be compounding when they co-occur. Seek cooler, cleaner indoor air – at home if possible, and elsewhere if not.

Working together to protect the public's health.



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