



## National Center for Environmental Health

# Wildfire Smoke

Dry conditions in much of the United States increase the potential for wildfires in or near wilderness areas. Stay alert for wildfire smoke. This smoke can hurt your eyes, irritate your respiratory system, and worsen chronic heart and lung diseases.



## Who is at greatest risk from wildfire smoke?

- **People who have lung diseases** like [COPD](#) or [asthma](#), or [heart disease](#), are at higher risk from wildfire smoke.
- **Older adults** are more likely to be affected by smoke. This may be due to their increased risk of heart and lung diseases.
- **Children** are more likely to be affected by health threats from smoke. Children's airways are still developing, and they breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults. Also, children often spend more time outdoors engaged in activity and play.
- **Expectant mothers** may be more likely to be affected by smoke because of physical changes during pregnancy, like increased breathing rates. Expectant mothers affected by smoke may also be at risk for problems such as preterm birth and babies born with low birth weight.



## Take steps to reduce your risk from wildfire smoke.

- **Be prepared for wildfires.**
- **Check local air quality reports.** Listen and watch for news or health warnings about smoke. Find out if your community provides reports about the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's [Air Quality Index \(AQI\)](#) [↗](#) or check the [AirNow fire and smoke map](#). [↗](#) In addition, pay attention to public health messages about safety measures.
- **Consult local visibility guides.** Some communities have monitors that measure the amount of particles in the air. In the Western United States, some states and communities have guidelines to help people determine if there are high levels of particulates in the air by how far they can see.
- **Keep indoor air as clean as possible** if you are advised to stay indoors. Keep windows and doors closed. Run an air conditioner, but keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside. If you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed, go to a designated shelter away from the affected area. [Learn more about protecting yourself and your family from smoke during a wildfire.](#)
- **Avoid activities that increase indoor pollution.** Burning candles, fireplaces, and gas stoves can increase indoor pollution. Vacuuming



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stirs up particles already inside your home, contributing to indoor pollution. Smoking also puts even more pollution into the air.

- **Prevent wildfires from starting.** Prepare, build, maintain, and extinguish campfires safely. Follow local regulations if you burn trash or debris. Check with your local fire department to be sure the weather is safe enough for burning.
- **Follow the advice of your doctor or other health care provider** about medicines and about your respiratory management plan if you have asthma or another lung disease. Consider evacuating if you are having trouble breathing. Call your doctor for advice if your symptoms worsen.
- **If you are pregnant,** continue with your prenatal care. Talk to your health care provider about where to get prenatal or delivery services if the office is closed. Know the signs of labor and early labor. If you have these signs, call your health care provider or 9-1-1, or go to the hospital right away if it is safe to travel.
- **Do not rely on dust masks for protection.** Paper “comfort” or “dust” masks commonly found at hardware stores are designed to trap large particles, such as sawdust. These masks will *not* protect your lungs from the small particles found in wildfire smoke. [Read more on choosing and using respirators to protect your lungs from smoke and ash](#)  [\[PDF – 351 KB\]](#) 
- **Evacuate from the path of wildfires.** Listen to the news to learn about current evacuation orders. Follow the instructions of local officials about when and where to evacuate. Take only essential items with you. Follow designated evacuation routes—others may be blocked—and plan for heavy traffic.
- **Protect yourself when cleaning up after a fire.** Cleanup work can expose you to ash and other products of the fire that may irritate your eyes, nose, or skin and cause coughing and other health effects. [Learn how to stay safe cleaning up after a wildfire.](#)



Stay alert for wildfire warnings.

## More Information

- [Protect Yourself from Wildfire Smoke](#)
- [When Wildfire Threatens \[PODCAST – 5:50 minutes\]](#)
- [Wildfires](#)
- [Prevent Wildfires](#) 
- [Protect Yourself from Wildfires](#) 
- [Air Quality Index](#) 
- [Incendios forestales](#)
- [Wildfire Smoke and Pregnancy](#)
- [Wildfire Smoke and Children](#)
- [Chronic Conditions and Wildfire Smoke](#)

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