

Health Risks Associated with Exposure to Smoke

Is smoke bad for me?

If you are healthy, you usually are not at a major risk of illness from smoke. However, even healthy children and adults can be affected by smoke and should take precautions. People who are at greater risk of illness from smoke include people with heart or lung disease, such as congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema or asthma. Children and the elderly are also more vulnerable.

How do I know if I'm being affected by smoke?

You may have a scratchy throat, cough, irritated sinuses, headaches, runny nose, upset stomach or stinging eyes. Children and people with lung disease may find it difficult to breathe as deeply or vigorously as usual, and they may cough or feel short of breath. People with diseases such as asthma or chronic bronchitis may find their symptoms worsening.

If you have repeated coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, trouble breathing or nausea, seek medical care immediately.

What can I do to protect myself?

Use common sense. If it looks smoky outside, it's probably a good time for you and your children to remain indoors and to reduce physical exertion and outdoor activity. If you notice any symptoms—scratchy throat, cough, irritated sinuses, runny nose, upset stomach or stinging eyes—you and your children need to remain indoors.

If you are advised to stay indoors, keep your windows, doors and vents closed. Run your air conditioner, if you have one. Close the outside air intake and keep the air filters clean. If you do not have an air conditioner and outside temperatures are very high, it would be wise to seek shelter in a facility with air conditioning.

If you have asthma, be mindful about taking your medicines as prescribed by your doctor. If you are supposed to measure your peak flows, make sure you do so. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

How can I tell when smoke levels are dangerous?

Generally, the worse the visibility, the worse the smoke levels. Use visibility to help gauge wildfire smoke levels and approximate air quality.

For more information, please visit the Santa Clara County Public Health Department at www.sccphd.org, and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District at www.baaqmd.gov.

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