

Smokey Skies: Frequently Asked Questions On Smoke Exposure

Many of us can see the smoke outside and wonder about its health effects. Smoke is a complex mix of gases and particulate matter produced during the combustion process. Many of the components of wood (and other) smokes have irritant properties and can effect eyes, ears, nose, throat, and cardio/respiratory systems.

Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about smoke exposure.

1) *Is it okay to go outside?*

Symptoms are probably the best guide. If smoke levels produce mucous membrane (throat, eyes, nose) irritation or other symptoms, reduce exposure (i.e. get out of the smoke).

Smoke levels may be lower indoors. Because the gases and the smallest particles found in smoke can penetrate buildings, levels of smoke indoors will not be zero. If you stay indoors be aware of heat exposure. In some cases staying in a hot closed indoor environment may be worse than smoke exposure.

Smoke conditions can change quickly or may be fairly constant over the day depending on distance to the fire, prevailing winds and dispersion conditions. Areas affected by wood smoke may be confined to small pockets or may include large areas.

2) *How can I protect myself from the smoke inside my home?*

If you have an air conditioned home, closing all windows and doors will help keep out smoke. If your home is not air-conditioned be sure that indoor temperatures with doors and windows closed do not become excessive. Exposure to too much heat can also result in illness.

3) *Is it OK to go outside if I'm pregnant?*

See question 1.

4) *Is it okay for my children to go outside?*

See question 1.

5) Should I be wearing a mask?

If you have symptoms as indicated in Question 1, you should reduce exposure as much as possible and, if necessary, contact your physician. It is probably better to 'get out of the smoke', if possible, rather than put on a mask. Simple masks that cover the lower half of the face may provide some protection to the nose, mouth and throat but will not cover the eyes or stop inhalable particles.

Some masks may increase your breathing effort, which may create other problems. Before considering a mask, talk to your physician.

If you have smoke related symptoms, reduce your exposure and see your Doctor if required. If symptoms are serious enough or you have an underlying illness that has been made worse, seek medical attention. In an emergency, breathing through a damp cloth may help reduce exposure to irritants in smoke. If your symptoms are this bad, seek medical attention.

6) I have asthma, how can I prevent an asthma attack?

Avoid or reduce exposure to smoke. Adjustment of medication as per your physician's directions may also be of benefit. Follow your established protocols and, where symptoms are serious enough, see your physician. If symptoms are worse with activity, reduce activity.

7) Should I leave the area?

You are the best judge of this. Evacuations are ordered by Emergency authorities where there is an immediate danger to human life. As these areas are closest to the fire the evacuations based on safety concerns will also remove people from areas that are likely to have the highest concentrations of smoke, directly in the path of the fire.

In areas where no evacuation has been ordered for safety reasons, people should use symptoms as a guide to whether they need to reduce smoke exposure.

Whether reducing smoke exposure is best achieved through staying indoors or leaving the area will depend on local factors.

8) What medical conditions would put an individual at additional risk due to smoke exposure?

People with pre-existing lung or heart disease may experience worsening of their symptoms when exposed to smoke.

For more information call the

**BC Health Guide Nurse Line
Available 24 Hours Toll Free
1-866-215-4700**

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