

WILDFIRE SMOKE

community care facilities



Wildfire smoke events are becoming more frequent and severe as the climate changes, resulting in more days with poor air quality that can impact health.

Wildfire smoke is a mixture of small particles and gases. The small particles in wildfire smoke, also known as fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), can travel deep into the lungs when breathed in and cause inflammation throughout the body. This can have **both short-term and longer-lasting health impacts**.

Older adults and people with certain chronic/pre-existing health conditions (e.g. asthma, heart disease, and diabetes) are particularly susceptible to the health effects of wildfire smoke.

It is also important to note that more wildfire smoke is inhaled as the intensity of physical activity increases. People breathe more quickly and deeply when they exercise.

Reducing exposure to wildfire smoke can help protect health.

Wildfire smoke symptoms:

- Sore throat
- Eye irritation
- Runny nose
- Mild cough
- Phlegm production
- Wheezy breathing
- Headaches



Severe wildfire smoke symptoms:

- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations
- Severe cough
- Chest pain
- Dizziness

Anyone with these symptoms needs medical attention



People with symptoms should be supported to promptly stop physical activity and seek cleaner air during smoky conditions. Those with severe symptoms should be supported to access medical attention.

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How to prepare for the wildfire season?

The following are recommended *options* to help protect health from wildfire smoke, implement them where feasible and appropriate.

- Subscribe to **air quality advisories** and alerts for your region (see resources below).
 - [WeatherCAN App](#)
 - [Metro Vancouver Air Quality and Climate Action Mailing List](#)
- Develop a “**Wildfire Smoke Readiness Plan**”, using public health guidance. Regional health authority programs can provide support. *ASHRAE Guideline 44P* provides information for the indoor air component of this plan.
- Prepare staff to know and identify **signs of illness related to smoke exposure**, and know when medical attention is needed.
- Be aware of **adults with chronic health conditions** that make them **more vulnerable** to poor air quality and plan to provide protection during poor air quality events.
- Ensure that people with chronic health conditions who are prescribed medications have **easy access to their medications** (e.g. inhalers for asthma). Ensure people with asthma have an [asthma action plan](#) in place.
- Consider setting up air quality monitors for PM_{2.5} at your facility. Contact your local health authority for support with monitor selection, data review, and guidance on thresholds for action. Monitor loans may be available. In general, indoor PM_{2.5} levels should be as low as reasonably achievable.

Heat and smoke can happen at the same time. Overheating is more dangerous than smoke exposure for most people at risk. Make sure that measures are in place (e.g. air conditioning, outdoor window shading) to **maintain indoor temperatures below 26°C (79°F)**, especially when windows and doors need to be kept closed during wildfire smoke events. Be aware of signs of heat illness when temperatures are high. **Cool and clean air** is the best way to protect from negative health impacts.

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Prepare to maintain clean air inside your facility

The following are recommended *options* to help protect health from wildfire smoke, implement them where feasible and appropriate.

- Review, understand and use [*ASHRAE Guideline 44P*](#) to prepare the building for wildfire smoke. Work with an HVAC professional where appropriate.
- Ensure building ventilation and air filtration systems are maintained according to manufacturers' specifications and any repairs have been completed.
- Install the highest level of filtration possible in the HVAC system. Filters with a rating of **MERV 13 (MPR 1900)** or greater (**ideally MERV 16+ or HEPA filters**) are strongly recommended to improve the removal of small particles. If possible, add an absorbent media air filter to capture gaseous pollutants (e.g. activated carbon) and include a pre-filter for larger particles to extend the life of the other filters.
- Consider adding **additional air filtration** to the air intake vents where possible (see [*ASHRAE Guideline 44P*](#) for details).
- Assess if the ventilation system can be set to **reduce the introduction of air from outdoors** at times when outdoor air quality is poor (see [*ASHRAE Guideline 44P*](#) for details).
- Assess if the building air can be **recirculated through the HVAC system filter(s) continuously during smoke events** (i.e. not on auto on/off). The indoor air must pass through the system filter regularly to remove the small particles that are most concerning for health (for example a MERV 13 filter only removes about 50% of the smallest particles on the first pass).
- **Plan to use portable air cleaners with HEPA filters and activated carbon pre-filters** during smoky periods. See advice on pages 5 & 6 on how to choose and use portable air cleaners.
 - If you are not able to buy or access commercial portable HEPA filter air cleaners, consider **“do-it-yourself” (DIY) air cleaners** using directions from the [BC Centre for Disease Control](#).
- Purchase extra replacement air filters in advance of a smoke event.

As recommended in [*ASHRAE Guideline 44P*](#), consider monitoring for indoor temperature, particulate matter, and carbon dioxide (CO₂). Your local health authority has temperature, CO₂, and particulate matter sensors available for short-term loans. Some municipal libraries have air quality monitor lending programs.



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What to do during a wildfire event?

The following are recommended *options* to help protect health from wildfire smoke, implement them where feasible and appropriate.

- Monitor the air quality closely. **Check your local Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)** regularly. Note that air quality can vary significantly throughout the day and by location. It can be helpful to look at the air quality data near you using the [low-cost sensor PM_{2.5} air quality map](#) found on the resources page.
- Be alert to symptoms among residents. Take action to reduce their exposure to wildfire smoke and seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Encourage and support residents to **stay well hydrated** to reduce inflammation.
- **Improve indoor air quality as much as possible.**
 - Use enhanced indoor air filtration to clean indoor air (see page 3).
 - If possible, adjust the ventilation system to reduce the introduction of air from outdoors at times when the outdoor air quality is poor.
 - If possible, set the HVAC system so that the building air is recirculated through the HVAC system filter(s) continuously during smoke events (i.e. not on auto on/off).
 - Consider **keeping windows and doors closed** during smoky periods; however, make sure that indoor temperatures can be maintained below 26°C (79°F) indoors to **prevent heat-related illnesses** (see page 2 heat section).
- **Monitor the Air Quality Health Index, and follow public health guidance.** Keep residents inside as much as possible during times of high outdoor smoke concentrations. Postpone planned outdoor activities or events if there is poor air quality. See the AQHI table with advice at the end of this document (on page 7).
- As an option to seek cool cleaner air, go on outings to **libraries, community centres or other public spaces** where there is air conditioning and filtration.

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How to choose portable air cleaners?

When buying a portable air cleaner, ensure the following specifications are met:

- Has **HEPA air filters** — removes the small particles in wildfire smoke.
- Has an **activated carbon filter** — removes some gaseous pollutants.
- Is **certified by AHAM** (Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers).
- **Is appropriate for the room size** — check the recommended maximum room size to make sure the one you buy is sized for your space. Multiple devices may be needed for larger rooms. See the [BCCDC Portable Air Cleaners for Wildfire Smoke](#) resource.
- **Does not produce ozone**, a lung irritant. Some units use electrostatic precipitation or ionizing technologies that can create ozone gas. If the unit has these features, make sure it has been tested for ozone production or is certified for low ozone production by the [California Air Resources Board](#).
- Has **ENERGY STAR** designation to maximize energy efficiency.
- **"Do-it-yourself" (DIY) air cleaners**, such as box fans with high-quality filters, are a cheaper and effective alternative to lower indoor concentrations of small particles. See the [BCCDC resource on Do-It-Yourself Air Cleaners](#) to learn how to make one.



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How to use portable air cleaners?

Portable air cleaner tips:

- Use air cleaners in the room(s) where people spend most of their time.
- Place the air cleaner(s) in a location(s) where the **airflow is not restricted** by walls, furniture, curtains and/or other objects.
- **Run the air cleaners continuously** when a room is occupied, as well as for an hour before a room is used if possible.
- Air cleaners work best when the **windows/doors are closed**. Heat may become an issue on hot days so ensure that **indoor temperatures are maintained below 26°C (79°F)**.
- Operate the air cleaner at the **highest setting** feasible. If the unit(s) is too noisy, consider using a lower setting.
- Set up a **maintenance plan** to replace air filters in the units regularly (as directed by the manufacturer).



Smoke infiltration:

Smoke can enter a building through ventilation systems, windows, doors, cracks in walls and other openings.

It is important for community care facilities to filter indoor air during wildfire smoke events.

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AQHI and Recommended Actions

1-HOUR PM _{2.5} (µg/m³)	PROVINCIAL AQHI	AQHI RISK CATEGORY	HEALTH MESSAGE FOR PEOPLE AT HIGHER RISK	HEALTH MESSAGE FOR GENERAL POPULATION	ACTIONS TO REDUCE WILDFIRE SMOKE EXPOSURE
0 - 10	1	LOW	Enjoy your usual outdoor activities.	Ideal air quality for outdoor activities.	Normal air quality in British Columbia.
11 - 20	2				
21 - 30	3				
31 - 40	4	MODERATE	Consider reducing or rescheduling strenuous activities outdoors if you experience symptoms.	No need to modify your usual outdoor activities unless you experience symptoms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a portable air cleaner to reduce smoke in your home. Stay inside with doors and windows closed, but keep cool - being too hot is riskier than breathing smoke for most people. Visit places with cleaner and cooler air, such as libraries, community centres, and shopping malls. If you cannot access cleaner air, consider using a well-fitted N95 respirator or relocating to an area with less smoke.
41 - 50	5				
51 - 60	6				
61 - 70	7	HIGH	Reduce or reschedule strenuous activity outdoors.	Consider reducing or rescheduling strenuous activities outdoor if you experience symptoms.	
71 - 80	8				
81 - 90	9				
91 - 100	10				
101+	10+	VERY HIGH	Avoid strenuous activity outdoors.	Reducing or reschedule strenuous activities outdoors, especially if you experience symptoms.	

Table adapted from BCCDC Wildfire Smoke and Air Quality Health Index fact sheet (see link below).

Wildfire Smoke Resources

Vancouver Coastal Health: Wildfire Smoke Fraser Health: Wildfire Smoke	Information for the public, community partners and health professionals regarding wildfire smoke, including a number of links to fact sheets and resources.
BCCDC: Wildfire Smoke Fact Sheets	Fact sheets about the health effects of wildfire smoke, tips on how to prepare for the wildfire season, choose portable air cleaners, DIY air cleaners, and use the AQHI.
Air Quality Health Index	Current air quality health index based on regulatory air quality monitors across BC.
Low-cost Sensor PM_{2.5} Air Quality Map	Current PM _{2.5} data from low-cost air quality monitors to monitor outdoor air quality nearby.

Want to learn more?

Check out these other guidance documents for community care facilities:

