

## Overview

Children and teenagers are more sensitive to air pollution than adults. This guide can help protect them from smoke.

Air quality during a smoke event can vary. The measurements at your nearest monitoring site may not accurately reflect conditions at your location.

Use your best judgement. If you can see or smell smoke, limit or prevent outdoor activities including planned excursions.

Children, teenagers and staff with known health issues should have health plans prepared (for example an [asthma plan](#)) ([nationalasthma.org.au/health-professionals/asthma-action-plans](http://nationalasthma.org.au/health-professionals/asthma-action-plans)).

You can check the air quality at [www.epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch).

You can find out more information about smoke and your health at [www.epa.vic.gov.au/smoke-health](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/smoke-health). For further information, updates and advice relating to incidents affecting air quality in your area go to <http://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/>.

## How to reduce smoke entering your school and early childhood centre building

Close all windows and doors. To avoid outdoor smoky air from coming indoors, turn evaporative coolers off. Air conditioners that do not take in air from outside, such as split systems, are fine to use. Older style air conditioners may have the option to recirculate or reuse air. If they do not have that function, turn them off.

Where possible, create cleaner air spaces in the school in a room where it's possible to manage entry and exit and keeping windows and doors closed. You can also use portable indoor air cleaners if they are available. For more information on portable air cleaners refer to [Fact sheet – smoke and portable indoor air cleaners](#) (publication 1809) ([epa.vic.gov.au/about-epa/publications/1809](http://epa.vic.gov.au/about-epa/publications/1809)).

When smoky conditions have cleared, or there is a break in smoky conditions, open windows and doors to air out rooms.

## What to do if external windows can't be closed

Consider your facility's emergency management plan when there is a smoke event. One possibility is using the nominated shelter indoors. This can provide a temporary protective measure from smoke from a fire or other outdoor hazardous pollution.

More information on shelter-in-place relevant to educational services is available at:

<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/shelter-place-buildings/policy>.

# Air quality and outdoor activity: guide for schools and early childhood centres



## Air quality categories

This table shows when and how to change your outdoor activity based on EPA's [air quality categories](#).

Air quality category	Outdoor activity guidance
Good	No change needed to normal outdoor activities.
Fair	<p>No change is needed to normal outdoor activities.</p> <p><b>Additional advice for infants and children 14 years and younger and other sensitive groups:**</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce outdoor physical activity if symptoms develop like cough or shortness of breath.</li> <li>• Consider closing windows and doors until outdoor air quality is better.</li> <li>• Ensure medical treatment plans are followed.</li> <li>• Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call <a href="https://ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call">Nurse on Call</a> (ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call) on 1300 60 60 24.</li> <li>• If anyone has trouble breathing or tightness in the chest, call 000 for an ambulance.</li> </ul>
Poor	<p>When indoors, close windows and doors until outdoor air quality is better.</p> <p>Shorter and less strenuous activities, such as recess, are okay to hold outside.</p> <p>Longer activities such as physical education or sports training should be avoided outdoors.</p> <p>Reduce outdoor physical activity if symptoms develop like cough or shortness of breath.</p> <p>Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call <a href="https://ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call">Nurse on Call</a> (ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call) on 1300 60 60 24.</p> <p>If anyone has trouble breathing or tightness in the chest, call 000 for an ambulance.</p> <p><b>Additional advice for infants and children 14 years and younger and other sensitive groups:**</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid outdoor physical activity if symptoms develop like cough or shortness of breath.</li> <li>• Offer activities indoors.</li> <li>• Watch for symptoms** and take action as needed.</li> <li>• Anyone with asthma should follow their asthma action plan and keep their quick-relief medicine handy. Anyone with other conditions should follow the treatment plan recommended by their doctor.</li> </ul>

<b>Air quality category</b>	<b>Outdoor activity guidance</b>
<b>Very Poor</b>	<p>Move all activities indoors or reschedule them to another day.</p> <p>Close windows and doors until outdoor air quality is better.</p> <p>Excessive smoke levels can not only aggravate existing lung conditions, but may also irritate eyes, coughing or wheezing.</p> <p>Watch for symptoms** and take action as needed.</p> <p>Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call <a href="https://www.ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call">Nurse on Call</a> (ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call) on 1300 60 60 24.</p> <p>If anyone has trouble breathing or tightness in the chest, call 000 for an ambulance.</p> <p>Anyone with asthma should follow their asthma action plan and keep their quick-relief medicine handy. Anyone with other conditions should follow the treatment plan recommended by their doctor.</p>
<b>Extremely Poor</b>	<p>All activities should be indoors. Outdoor scheduled events or sporting events should be rescheduled or relocated.</p> <p>Close windows and doors until outdoor air quality is better.</p> <p>Excessive smoke levels can not only aggravate existing lung conditions, but may also irritate eyes, coughing or wheezing.</p> <p>Watch for symptoms** and take action as needed.</p> <p>Anyone with asthma should follow their asthma action plan and keep their quick-relief medicine handy. Anyone with other conditions should follow the treatment plan recommended by their doctor.</p> <p>Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call <a href="https://www.ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call">Nurse on Call</a> (ambulance.vic.gov.au/campaigns/nurse-on-call) on 1300 60 60 24.</p> <p>If anyone has trouble breathing or tightness in the chest, call 000 for an ambulance.</p>

\*\*Sensitive groups include people with a heart or lung condition, including asthma; people over the age of 65; infants and children 14 years and younger; and pregnant women.

**\*\*Watch for symptoms**

Air pollution can make asthma symptoms worse and trigger attacks. Symptoms of asthma include coughing, wheezing, difficulty breathing, and chest tightness. Even students, children and staff who do not have asthma could experience these symptoms.

**If symptoms occur:**

The student or staff member might need to take a break, do a less intense activity, stop all activity, go indoors, or use quick-relief medicine as prescribed. If symptoms don't improve, get medical help.

**Self-assessing air quality during smoky conditions**

A good way to estimate smoke levels and whether they may affect your health is to look at landmarks. They become harder to see when there's smoke in the air.

1. When there is no fire or smoke in the area, estimate the distance from you to various landmarks that you can see from your service or school. Keep a record of these.
2. When there is smoke in the area, use the estimated distances to the landmarks, along with the table below, to help identify the air quality category. For example, if you can't clearly see a building more than 5–10 km away, the air quality could be poor.
3. Take any precautions, using the table EPA's air quality categories on page 2 as a guide.

Air quality category	Visibility
Good	>20 km
Fair	>10 km and 20 km
Poor	>5 km and 10 km
Very Poor	>1.5 km and 5 km
Extremely Poor	1.5 km or less

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## Taking breaks and doing less intense activities

Students and children breathe harder when they are active for a longer period or when they do more intense activities. More pollution enters the lungs when a person is breathing harder.

Students and children should take breaks and do less intense activities when the air quality category is Poor, Very Poor or Extremely Poor.

This helps to:

- reduce the amount of time students and children are breathing hard (for example take breaks; rotate players frequently)
- reduce the intensity of activities so students and children are not breathing so hard (for example walk instead of run).

## Decision to relocate or close schools

To ensure the community is getting consistent cautionary health advice, any decision or advice to relocate or close schools and early childhood centres may be made in consultation with:

- Department of Education and Training
- the Chief Health Officer
- State Response Controller
- other emergency management agencies to ensure alignment with cautionary health advice/action across community.

## Stay informed

Be prepared and make sure you're connected to emergency sources:

- Visit the EMV website for all incidents and warnings advice <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/>.
- Tune in to ABC local radio, commercial and designated radio stations.
- Download the VicEmergency app – allow push notifications for warnings.
- Save the VicEmergency Hotline 1800 226 226 into your phone contacts.
- Connect with VicEmergency or Fire Rescue Victoria Twitter and Facebook accounts.

This publication is for general guidance only. You should obtain professional advice if you have any specific concern. EPA Victoria has made every reasonable effort to ensure accuracy at the time of publication.

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EPA acknowledges Aboriginal people as the first peoples and Traditional custodians of the land and water on which we live, work and depend. We pay respect to Aboriginal Elders, past and present and recognise their continuing connection to, and aspirations for Country.



For languages other than English, please call **131 450**.

Visit [epa.vic.gov.au/language-help](https://epa.vic.gov.au/language-help) for next steps.

If you need assistance because of a hearing or speech impairment, please visit [relayservice.gov.au](https://relayservice.gov.au)