

Fact sheet: Smoke and your health



Environment
Protection
Authority Victoria



Publication 1743 April 2019

Fact sheet

How smoke affects your health

Smoke from bushfires, planned burns and other sources can impact air quality. Smoke is a mixture of different-sized particles, water vapour and gases (like carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide). The biggest health threat from smoke comes from fine particles. This is because these particles can be breathed deep into your lungs, causing breathing problems and worsening pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma and heart disease. The effects of smoke exposure on your health are worse when you do physical activity because you breathe more rapidly and deeply.

Sensitive groups

How smoke affects you depends on your age and existing medical conditions. Some people are more sensitive to the effects of smoke exposure.

Pre-existing medical conditions

People with pre-existing medical conditions, such as heart or lung conditions, may experience health impacts from smoke at lower smoke concentrations than healthy people, and their symptoms may be worse.

- If you have asthma, follow your personal asthma plan.
- If you have a heart or lung condition you should follow the treatment plan advised by your doctor and keep at least five days' supply of medication on hand.
- Take extra care in smoky conditions, and rest as much as possible.
- Seek immediate medical advice if symptoms persist.

Children

Children under 14 years of age are more sensitive to smoke, because they are more likely to be active outdoors. Their respiratory systems are still developing, and they breathe more air per body weight than adults. Every effort should be made to minimise their exposure to smoke.

Further information and updates

Contact EPA on
1300 372 842 (24 hours)
(1300 EPA VIC)
or epa.vic.gov.au

- Incident information and updates:
emergency.vic.gov.au
- If you are experiencing any symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure, seek medical advice or contact NURSE-ON-CALL: 1300 60 60 24
- Up-to-date air quality information:
epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch
- Information about smoke and your health:
epa.vic.gov.au/smoke
- Emergency information:
epa.vic.gov.au/our-work/emergency-information



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People over 65 and smokers

People over the age of 65 and smokers are more sensitive to exposure to smoke. Their symptoms can be worse at lower smoke concentrations compared to other people.

Asbestos

Research has shown that building fires involving asbestos-containing materials do not result in levels of asbestos fibres in the surrounding area high enough to cause a risk to health. This is because during a fire the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is relatively low.

Asbestos fibres change their mineral structure after prolonged heating, often losing their fibrous nature and mechanical strength. The degraded material does not pose a risk to health.

How to protect your health

Smoke can affect your health. To minimise the potential health impacts, everyone should avoid breathing in smoke.

- How smoke affects you depends on your age, pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma or heart disease, and the length of time you are exposed to the smoke.
- Signs of short-term smoke irritation such as itchy eyes, sore throat, runny nose and coughing usually clear up in healthy adults once you're away from the smoke.
- People with pre-existing conditions, including asthmatics, should take their medication, follow their treatment plan and seek immediate medical advice if symptoms such as breathing issues, wheezing or tightness in the chest persist.
- Limit prolonged or heavy physical activity.
- Stay inside if possible, with the windows and doors closed.
- Switch air-conditioners to recirculate or reuse air. If they do not have that function, turn them off.
- Try to take an air-conditioned break elsewhere if it is safe to do so and your home is uncomfortable.
- Look out for elderly neighbours or other people at risk.

Smoke and your pets

Animals, like people, can be sensitive to the effects of smoke. If safe to do so, keep your animals inside with access to food and water to minimise their exposure. If you need to evacuate your home, take your animals with you, or leave them inside.

Ash and soot on your animals may impact their health when they groom themselves. Wash them as you normally would with pet shampoo to remove anything covering their fur or feathers.

Signs of smoke inhalation in your pets can include coughing and increased rate or difficulty in breathing. If you suspect your animals have been affected by smoke, seek advice from your local vet.

Useful links

- VicEmergency has information on current incidents (VicEmergency hotline 1800 226 226) as well a list of useful information sources: emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/
- Better Health Channel: betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Country Fire Authority: cfa.vic.gov.au
- Metropolitan Fire Brigade: mfb.vic.gov.au
- Forest Fire Management of Victoria (planned burns in the next 10 days): ffm.vic.gov.au

Anyone having trouble breathing or chest pain should seek urgent medical assistance – phone 000.