

# Smoke and your health

Publication 1743.1 | Fact sheet | April 2019

## What is smoke?

Smoke is a collection of airborne particles, usually from fire. Smoke in the air is a complex mixture of:

- different size particles
- water vapour
- gases – including carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds.

We measure particles in the air using measurements called PM<sub>2.5</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub>. PM<sub>2.5</sub> are smaller than 2.5 micrometres (µm) in diameter. PM<sub>10</sub> are smaller than 10 micrometres.

## How smoke impacts health

Most healthy people tolerate brief smoke exposure quite well. Smoke is more likely to affect some people including:

- those with heart or lung conditions
- pregnant women
- young children
- the elderly.

Symptoms of smoke exposure – including bushfire smoke – can include:

- eye, nose and throat irritation
- coughing
- sneezing
- congestion

Exposure to smoke may be a risk because it can:

- trigger asthma
- worsen heart disease

- reduce visibility and road safety.

The smaller the smoke particles, the greater the potential health impact may be.

## What to do when it's smoky outside?

If you see or smell smoke outside, you should stay inside. But only if it's safe to do so.

Remember to:

- keep your windows and doors shut
- switch your air conditioner to 'recirculate'
- take a break from the smoky conditions – for example, visit a friend or go to a large air-conditioned location
- air out your house when the smoke clears
- look out for children, older people, and others at risk
- keep pets inside with clean water and food. Keep pets' bedding inside if possible.

When it's smoky, take care of your health, especially if you're sensitive to air pollution. You can do this by:

- reducing physical activity
- following your treatment plan if you have a heart or lung condition
- following your asthma action plan
- seeing your doctor or calling NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 606 024 if you're worried about your symptoms
- calling 000 if you experience chest tightness or difficulty breathing.

If you're in an area impacted by a bushfire, follow your bushfire plan

[epa.vic.gov.au](http://epa.vic.gov.au)

Environment Protection Authority Victoria  
GPO Box 4395, Melbourne VIC 3001  
1300 372 842



## What about wearing a facemask?

Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine particles from smoke. They are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.

Special face masks (called 'P2' masks) filter smoke, providing greater protection against inhaling fine particles. They are available at most hardware stores.

However, before deciding to wear a mask you should understand that:

- they can be hot and uncomfortable to wear
- they can make it harder for you to breathe normally
- if you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition you should seek medical advice before using a mask
- if the seal around the face and mouth is poor the mask is much less effective
- men should be clean shaven to get a good seal
- the masks do not filter out gases such as carbon monoxide
- it's better to stay indoors, away from the smoke, unless you can't avoid working outdoors.

## 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.

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
- increased rate or difficulty in breathing.

If you suspect your animals have been affected by smoke, seek advice from your local vet.

## Further information and updates

Contact EPA on 1300 372 842  
or [epa.vic.gov.au](http://epa.vic.gov.au)

- Incident information and updates:  
[emergency.vic.gov.au](http://emergency.vic.gov.au)  
VicEmergency hotline 1800 226 226
- If you are experiencing any symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure, seek medical advice or contact  
NURSE-ON-CALL: 1300 606 024
- Up-to-date air quality information:  
[epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch](http://epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch)
- Information about smoke and your health:  
[epa.vic.gov.au/smoke](http://epa.vic.gov.au/smoke)
- Health and medical information:  
[betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://betterhealth.vic.gov.au)



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Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne