

Forest Fires and Respiratory Health Fact Sheet

Wildfires are an ongoing concern, particularly in the Southwest and Midwestern U.S., where there is dry, hot weather. During a wildfire, people all over the area may be suffering the effects of forest fire smoke.

The American Lung Association urges those with respiratory problems such as asthma, emphysema, and bronchitis and also those with chronic heart disease to monitor their breathing and exposure to airborne matter. If problems develop call your physician immediately.

General recommendations:

- * People living in close proximity to the fire-stricken areas should remain indoors and avoid inhalation of smoke, ashes, and particulate matter in the area. Ordinary dust masks, designed to filter out large particles, will not help as they still allow the more dangerous smaller particles to pass through. Special, more expensive dust masks with true HEPA filters will filter out the damaging fine particles but are difficult for people with lung disease to use. Consult with your physician before using a mask, especially if you have a lung disease.
- * If you live close to or in the surrounding area, it's recommended that you refrain from exercising outdoors, especially if you smell smoke or notice eye or throat irritation.
- * Extra precaution should be taken for children, who are more susceptible to smoke because their respiratory systems are still developing and they breathe in more air (and consequently more pollution) per pound of body mass than adults.
- * When driving your car in smoky areas, keep your windows and vents closed. Air conditioning should only be operated in the "recirculate" setting.

People with respiratory problems and chronic heart disease should:

- * Stay inside as much as possible, with doors, windows and fireplace dampers shut and preferably with clean air circulating through air conditioners and/or air cleaners. Use air conditioners on the recirculation setting so outside air will not be moved into the room.
- * Due to the higher levels of pollutants in some areas, there is a possibility of experiencing increased symptoms. If you are experiencing symptoms, please try to contact your physician. If you cannot, asthma patients can follow the asthma action plan developed with their physician. Use your peak flow meter if prescribed. Do not hesitate to take your medication, and avail yourself of the full spectrum of medications your doctor has prescribed to you.
- * If outdoor trips in smoky areas are necessary, breathe through a damp cloth to help filter out particles in the air.
- * People with asthma should check with their physician regarding any changes in medication that may be needed to cope with the smoky conditions.

* People using oxygen should not adjust their levels of intake before consulting a physician. (Call your doctor BEFORE you take any action.)

* If pulmonary symptoms are not relieved by the usual medicines, seek medical attention. Symptoms to watch for: wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty taking a full breath, chest heaviness, light headedness, and dizziness. If you have any concerns or questions please contact your physician.

* If you develop a persistent cough, or difficult or painful breathing, call your physician. The onset of symptoms can appear as late as 24 to 48 hours after exposure and that smoke can remain in areas for many days after the fires have ended.

In relation to clean up, residents and volunteers should use caution since the clean-up process involves ashes and other particulates:

* People with lung or heart problems should avoid clean-up activities and areas where dust or soot are present.

* Thoroughly wet dusty and soot area prior to clean-up.

* This will help to reduce the amount of particulates becoming air-borne.

* Wear an appropriate dust mask during clean-up.

* If exposure to asbestos or other hazardous materials are suspected, do not disturb the area. Dust masks do not protect against asbestos.

For more information on respiratory health please contact the American Lung Association by calling 1-800-LUNGUSA.

The above information is from the American Lung Association website (<http://www.lung.org>): <http://www.lung.org/healthy-air/outdoor/protecting-your-health/what-makes-air-unhealthy/forest-fires-respiratory-health-fact-sheet.html>.

For additional information see:

<http://www.lung.org/associations/states/illinois/news/protect-yourself-from-forest.html>.

<http://www.epa.gov/airnow/smoke/Smoke2003final.pdf>.