

Frequently Asked Questions about Wildfire Smoke & COVID-19

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General information about WILDFIRE SMOKE

- When it comes to COVID-19 and wildfires, we know that exposure to smoke and other forms of air pollution can increase the risk of respiratory infections, and sometimes make them more severe.
- When smoke is heavy, the key strategy to **protect yourself**, particularly if you have a condition that makes you more sensitive, is to lessen your exposure. People can do this by staying inside at home, getting and using an air filter, spending time in a cleaner air space, or, if the smoke will be around for a while, going to an area with better air quality if you can.
- If you choose to leave home to go to an area with cleaner air, please remember to take a face covering and hand sanitizer.
- One of the things we ask people do to protect themselves from wildfire smoke, staying home, also lessens the risk for COVID.
- You can find good information on how to protect yourself from wildfire smoke at our website healthoregon.org/wildfires
 - On that page you'll find a link to the Oregon smoke blog put together by local, state, tribal and federal agencies to coordinate and share information about wildfire smoke affecting Oregon communities.
- Some communities have cleaner air spaces, like a library or school, that people at higher risk from smoke exposure can go to when smoke levels are high, and if they can't make a clean air space in their homes.
- Certain people are more sensitive than others to acute health effects from smoke:
 - **People with heart disease or underlying lung disease, like asthma.**
 - **Older adults** may be more likely to have heart or lung diseases.
 - **Children** are still developing, spend more time being active outside, and have a higher breathing rate than adults.
 - **Smoke exposure to pregnant women** can increase risk for low-birthweight babies.

- **Finally, people living in poverty** are typically at higher risk from smoke because they are more likely to have pre-existing conditions, less able to avoid or protect themselves from smoke, and more likely to lack housing and live in places with relatively high levels of background air pollution from other sources.
- Fine particles from smoke, 2.5 microns in size or smaller, are the cause of much of the immediate health risk from smoke.

What about mask use for wildfire smoke?

- Cloth masks may protect others from COVID-19, but they don't protect against wildfire smoke.
- N95 respirators, if properly fit tested and worn, may offer protection against wildfire smoke.
- That said, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, N95 masks are being prioritized for health care workers and first responders.

What about respirators?

Respirators have several limitations and may create a false sense of security:

- Common masks and bandanas don't provide adequate protection
- They are not available in children's sizes
- They don't work well for people with facial hair
- Respirators only work for adults if properly fit-tested and worn
- Respirators can make breathing harder for people with respiratory issues

What about studies that show that inside air is worse than outside air?

- There are studies that show that polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) are found both inside homes and in wildfire smoke.
- While we in public health are concerned with long-term exposure to PAHs as an elevator of cancer risk, during a wildfire, people breathing outside air face an immediate risk from breathing in particulate matter.

- Short-term exposure to particulate matter can cause heart attacks in people with pre-existing heart conditions and exacerbate pre-existing respiratory conditions.
- The advice to seal out air from outside the home during a smoke event is to reduce exposure to high levels of particulate matter.
- The advice to make sure your home is well ventilated when the air is clean is good advice.
- Even during wildfires, there are often periods of the day that have better outdoor air than others. Take advantage of any periods of good outdoor air quality to open up and ventilate the house.
- Indoor air quality can be improved even when the house is sealed up by not burning gas stoves, smoking, burning incense or candles, using air fresheners, and vacuuming, all of which can either increase indoor particulate matter, PAHs, or both.

Where do I look for current air quality conditions?

- OregonAir phone application is a good and easy to understand application to have on your phone. It is free and can be found in your app store.
- Many weather apps on your phone also report air quality
- If you don't have a smart phone, go to healthoregon.org/wildfires or Oregon Smoke Blog online and
- If you don't have internet access or a smartphone, watch the TV news as they often report air quality indexes. Look outside, if it looks smokey outside, it likely is and best to stay inside if you can.

What is the difference between COVID-19 symptoms and wildfire smoke inhalation symptoms?

- Both smoke and COVID can give you chest pain, difficulty breathing and cough
- If you have a known exposure to COVID and/or you have diarrhea, loss of sense of smell or taste, fever or chills, exhaustion or muscle aches, sometimes with chest pain, difficulty breathing and cough, you could have COVID

- The elderly are the most susceptible to poor outcomes from COVID and wildfire smoke
- Children, pregnant women, elderly and people with chronic lung and/or heart conditions are most susceptible to poor outcomes from wildfire smoke inhalation

What can you do to protect yourself from Wildfire Smoke

- Limit time outside
- Close windows and doors when possible
- Drink plenty of water
- Set air conditioner to recirculate and use a HEPA filter if you can
- Change your house air filter if you have central air
- Attach a house air filter to the back of a box fan for more air filtration
- If you are sick, definitely seek care. Watch closely for respiratory distress, especially for loved ones that are more at risk for both COVID and wildfire smoke.