

How to protect yourself from SMOKE



What is the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) and how do I use it?

Fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) from wildfires and woodstove smoke can drive large, rapid changes in air quality that impact our health. The **Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)** is a colour scale that is designed to help people understand what normal air quality looks like, and how to adjust their activities when air quality worsens.

1-HOUR PM _{2.5} (µg/m ³)	PROVINCIAL AQHI	AQHI RISK CATEGORY	HEALTH MESSAGE FOR PEOPLE AT HIGHER RISK	HEALTH MESSAGE FOR GENERAL POPULATION	ACTIONS TO REDUCE WILDFIRE SMOKE EXPOSURE
0 – 10	1	LOW	Enjoy your usual outdoor activities.	Ideal air quality for outdoor activities.	Normal air quality in British Columbia
11 – 20	2				
21 – 30	3				
31 – 40	4	MODERATE	Consider reducing or rescheduling strenuous activities outdoors if you experience symptoms.	No need to modify your usual outdoor activities unless you experience symptoms.	• Use a portable air cleaner or DIY box fan air cleaner to reduce smoke in your home • Stay inside with doors and windows closed, but keep cool – heat-related illness is more risky than breathing smoke for most people • Visit places with cleaner and cooler air, such as libraries, community centres, and shopping malls • Wear a well-fitted respirator (e.g. N95) outdoors.
41 – 50	5				
51 – 60	6				
61 – 70	7	HIGH	Reduce or reschedule strenuous activity outdoors.	Consider reducing or rescheduling strenuous activities outdoors if you experience symptoms.	
71 – 80	8				
81 – 90	9				
91 – 100	10				
101+	10+	VERY HIGH	Avoid strenuous activity outdoors.	Reduce or reschedule strenuous activity outdoors, especially if you experience symptoms.	

From: *Wildfire smoke and the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)*. <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/prevention-public-health/wildfire-smoke>

Who is most susceptible to smoke?

- People with chronic respiratory conditions (e.g., asthma or COPD)
- People with heart disease, diabetes or other chronic health conditions
- Pregnant people, young children and older adults
- People with physically demanding jobs and those who work outdoors

Individual reactions to smoky conditions may vary! That's why it's important to monitor your symptoms and keep an eye on local air quality to understand where your personal sensitivity lies.

Find out more about using a respirator:



What are the signs of smoke exposure and what should I do?

Mild	More Severe
Eye irritation, runny nose, sore throat, wheezing, mild cough, headaches	Shortness of breath, bad cough, dizziness, chest pain, fast beating/fluttering heart
Reduce exposure by reducing outdoor activity and implementing indoor air cleaning.	Call HealthLink BC (8-1-1), visit your health-care provider, or go to a walk-in clinic or emergency department, depending on severity of symptoms.

[Community Virtual Care](#) also offers support for wildfire smoke-related illness. A registered nurse will call you twice a day to monitor your symptoms and connect you with other services. Visit the [CVC webpage](#) or call your local Community Access office to learn more (North Island: [1-866-928-4988](#); Central Island: [1-877-734-4101](#); South Island: [1-888-533-2273](#)).

How can I keep track of my local air quality?

Many communities now have access to free, up-to-the-minute air quality information from a **community air sensor network**. These networks rely on low-cost particulate matter sensors that provide more localized air quality data. Environment and Climate Change Canada then reviews and posts this information on a free interactive map, the **AQMap**. Click on the air sensor nearest you to learn:

- The local PM_{2.5} concentration;
- The current estimated AQHI;
- Suggested actions for at-risk individuals as well as the general population.

During wildfire season, the Province and Island Health may also issue a **Smoky Skies Bulletin** if extremely poor air quality is expected over a prolonged period (24-48 hours). You can sign up for Smoky Skies Bulletins in advance using the QR code.

Find your local sensor
on the AQMap



Sign up for
Air Quality Advisories:



How do I reduce my exposure to smoke?

- **Listen to your body** regarding outdoor physical activity – if your breathing becomes difficult or uncomfortable, stop or reduce the activity.
- Outdoor **smoke will infiltrate** indoor spaces. Consider using an air cleaner with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter to lower indoor PM. If necessary, you can make your own **DIY air cleaner**.
- When outdoor air quality deteriorates, use your air cleaner(s) to create a **cleaner air space** in your home (e.g., a bedroom). Air cleaning works best when windows and doors are closed.
- **Stay cool** and drink plenty of fluids.
- **Reduce indoor pollution sources**, such as smoking and indoor wood burning. If you rely on a **woodstove** for heat, choose a low-emission, CSA-certified stove, clean your chimney regularly, use your dampers, and burn only properly conditioned wood (seasoned and cut into smaller pieces).
- **Respirators** can provide some protection from outdoor smoke. However, it is important to be aware of the limitations of mask use in such situations.
- **Stock up** on at least 5 days worth of medications to prepare for smoke events.

Learn how to choose a
HEPA air cleaner:



Learn how to make a
DIY Air Cleaner:



What if it's hot and smoky?

Heat generally causes more deaths on a hot day than smoke causes on a smoky day. However, many people impacted by heat are also impacted by smoke. If you belong to an at-risk group, **prioritize staying cool**. If you can't create a cooler, cleaner air space in your home, try visiting an air-conditioned public space or a cooling center.