

Dust Storms – Health Impacts

Dust storms are natural events that occur when heavy winds blow loose sand, dirt and other fine particles from deserts and semi-arid landscapes into urban areas. Dust storms may have adverse effects on your health and is especially harmful for people who already have breathing-related difficulties. Inhaling small or fine dust can get deep into the lungs and cause serious health problems.

What are the health effects of dust storms?

Common symptoms that you may experience during a dust storm include:

- Itchy or burning eyes;
- Throat irritation;
- Skin irritation;
- Coughing or sneezing; and/or
- Respiratory or breathing difficulties, including asthma attacks.

If you have a heart or lung condition, follow your treatment plan prescribed by your doctor. **If you experience chest tightness, wheezing, difficulty breathing, or your symptoms do not settle, seek urgent medical assistance.**

Who can be affected by dust storms?

Anyone can experience symptoms from dust storms. The longer you are exposed to high levels of dust, the greater the chance that it will affect your health.

People who are especially sensitive to the effects of dust include:

- People with existing heart or lung conditions (including asthma and hayfever);
- Infants, children and adolescents;
- Pregnant women; and
- People over 65 years of age.

How will I know if dust concentrations are dangerous?

It is difficult to tell whether a dust storm will be harmful to your health. The severity of a dust storm will depend on the size of the particles, composition of the particles, your current health, and how long you have been exposed to the dust storm.

What health precautions can I take?

The following precautions can help you minimise health effects from exposure:

- Leave the area for a cleaner environment;
- Stay indoors, with windows and doors closed;
- Stay in air-conditioned premises and switch the air-conditioner to 'recycle' or 'recirculate' to reduce the amount of dust entering the building;
- Visit a local air-conditioned building such as a library, community centre or shopping centre;
- Avoid vigorous exercise, especially if you have a heart or lung condition;
- If you have asthma, continue your medication and consult your general practitioner if required; and
- If it is safe to do so, check on elderly neighbours or other people who you think might need extra help.

If you must be outdoors when smoke is present, consider using a P2 rated mask designed to filter fine particles. These masks are available from hardware retailers.

Where can I find more information about dust storms?

ACT Health routinely monitors air quality at several sites across Canberra. If monitoring determines that air quality in Canberra is a hazard to health, the Chief Health Officer will issue an alert to the public.

For more information, visit the ACT Health website: <http://www.health.act.gov.au>.

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