

Outdoor Smoke – Health Impacts

Smoke from fires (including building fires, woodfire heaters, bushfires and hazard reduction burns) is made up of small particles and may include carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds.

Smoke can be harmful to your health and especially harmful to people who already have breathing-related difficulties.

What are the health effects of inhaling smoke?

Common symptoms that you may experience when around smoke includes:

- Itchy or burning eyes;
- Throat irritation;
- Runny nose;
- Shortness of breath and coughing.

Symptoms can occur for several days after exposure. Prolonged exposure to smoke particles can aggravate existing lung conditions, such as **chronic bronchitis**, **emphysema**, **asthma** and other **cardiac** conditions. If you have a heart or lung condition, follow your treatment plan prescribed by your doctor.

Who can be affected by inhaling smoke?

Anyone can experience symptoms from inhaling smoke. People who are especially sensitive to the effects of smoke include:

- People with heart or lung conditions (including asthma);
- Children;
- Pregnant women; and
- People over 65 years of age.

How will I know if smoke concentrations are dangerous?

Usually smoke can be seen as a visible haze and can be detected by its distinctive smell. The more visible the smoke haze, and the stronger the odour, the more likely the smoke contains concentrations of gases and/or particles that are hazardous to your health.

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 smoke 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 asthma or other chronic respiratory and/or chronic cardiac disease;
- If you have asthma, continue taking your medication, follow your asthma plan, and consult with 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.

Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice from their doctor. **If you experience chest tightness, wheezing, or difficulty breathing, seek urgent medical assistance.**

Where can I find more information about smoke?

ACT Health monitors air quality at several sites across Canberra. If the air quality in the ACT becomes a public health hazard, the Chief Health Officer will issue an alert to the public. You can also access further information on air quality at:

<http://www.health.act.gov.au/public-information/public-health/act-air-quality-monitoring/real-time-graphs>

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

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