Bushfire smoke and your health

Fact sheet | November 2024

Smoke from bushfires can harm your health by reducing the quality of the air you breathe. Everyone should minimise the time spent in smoky conditions whenever it is practical to do so.

People at higher risk

You are at higher risk of health harms from breathing smoky air if you:

- have lung problems of any kind, including asthma
- have other chronic illnesses like heart disease, diabetes or a previous stroke
- have diabetes
- are aged 65 years or over
- are an infant including unborn babies, or young child, especially under five years.
- are pregnant.

What to do if you can see or smell smoke

1. Make sure you are safe from any immediate fire danger

- Follow directions from emergency services and advice from your doctor at all times.

2. Decide if you are at higher risk

- The actions you take will depend on your age or your overall health, or those you care for.
- If you, or those you care for, are at higher risk, smoke can worsen existing health conditions.
- This might mean you need to seek urgent medical care.
- It is important to manage your health and reduce the smoke you breathe.

3. Manage your health

- If it's smoky, and you have a health condition such as asthma, you should actively manage your symptoms and minimise the time spent in smoky conditions as much as you can.
- Follow your asthma action plan, or your health plan for managing other health conditions.
- If you don't have an action plan, contact your GP. If you need advice after-hours call Healthdirect on 1800 022 222 or visit www.health.tas.gov.au.
- If symptoms worsen, go to your nearest hospital emergency department.
- In a medical emergency, call 000 for an ambulance.
- For people at lower risk, you may get symptoms such as burning eyes, a sore throat, runny nose or a cough from breathing smoky air for short periods. These should clear up quickly once the smoke goes, if they don't then seek medical care.

4. Reduce the smoke you breathe

These simple steps can help reduce how much smoke you breathe.

- Stay indoors and avoid physical activity outdoors.
- Close windows and doors in your home and open them when air quality improves.
- Spend time in places with cleaner air, this could be an air-conditioned public building like a library or shopping centre or visit family or friends in an area not affected by smoke.
- Use a P2/N95 face mask that fits well when you can't avoid smoke. They require an air-tight seal between the mask and your face to be most effective.
- If you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition, seek advice from your doctor if you have trouble breathing while wearing a P2/N95 mask.
- Consider using a portable air cleaner with a high-efficiency particulate air or HEPA filter, set up in a well-sealed room the right size for the filter.

5. Keep track of smoke

Identify where there is less smoke to help you reduce the smoke you breathe.

- For health advice and the Environment Protection Authority air quality data go to https://www.health.tas.gov.au/health-topics/environmental-health/air-quality
- The free AirRater app provides air quality data. It is available at https://airrater.org
- Smoke warnings may be issued on the TasALERT website, https://alert.tas.gov.au

Air quality is **not measured** everywhere in Tasmania.

- Smoke can vary from place to place and change quickly.
- Sometimes the air quality displayed could be different to the conditions you are experiencing.
- If you can see or smell smoke, and you are at higher risk, then take steps to protect your health and avoid breathing smoke if you can.

At all times, keeping safe from immediate fire danger is your highest priority.

For more information

- For warnings and emergency information go to the TasALERT website (alert.tas.gov.au) you can also download the TasAlert app.
- For all fire-related information, visit Tasmania Fire Service website (fire.tas.gov.au).
- Check your local news or radio for smoke warnings in your area.
- For easy read resources on what to do before, during and after a bushfire to stay safe (safeair.org.au)
- Contact your GP for medical advice or after-hours see know your treatment options (health.tas.gov.au)
- Contact Public Health Services Tasmania on 1800 671 738.

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