Wildfire Smoke 101 – How to Prepare For Wildfire Smoke



About wildfire smoke events

Communities across North America experience wildfire smoke events, typically from April to October. Smoke may be carried hundreds or thousands of kilometres from the fire zone. It is difficult to predict:

- when fires will occur
- how big they will be
- how much smoke they will generate

If you live in an area at higher risk for wildfires, it’s best to be prepared. You can develop plans and take actions to protect yourself and your family before wildfire season starts.

Checklist for wildfire smoke season preparedness

- Are you or is someone in your family at risk for wildfire smoke health effects?
- Do you have an adequate supply of medications?
- Do you have an adequate supply of food and water?
- Do you have spare filters for the air filtration unit (a high efficiency heat ventilation air conditioning (HVAC) system or an air purifier) in your home?
- Do you know where you can go to take a break from the smoke?
- Do you know where to find information about local air quality conditions?
- Do you know the emergency number for your local health authority?

People at risk

Some people may be more sensitive to the health effects of wildfire smoke exposure, including:

- seniors
- pregnant people
- infants and young children
- people who work outdoors

- people involved in strenuous outdoor exercise
- people with an existing illness or chronic health conditions, such as:
    - cancer
    - diabetes
    - mental illness
    - lung or heart conditions

Medical preparedness

If you, or members of your family, are in one or more of the at-risk groups and are in a region where air quality is impacted by wildfire smoke, be prepared by:

- speaking with a doctor or health care provider about developing a management plan for wildfire smoke events.
- maintaining a supply of necessary medications at home and always carrying these medications with you during wildfire season. Work with your health care provider to create a plan on what to do in case your medications are unable to stabilize your condition.

Consider these points to ensure you are prepared for a wildfire smoke event.

Prepare your home

It’s important that the air we breathe inside our home is clean because we spend a lot of time indoors. To ensure you have clean air in your home, you can prepare in advance by:

- learning how to use recirculation settings on your HVAC system to prevent smoke from entering your home
- purchasing a clean, good quality air filter (for example, HEPA filter) for your ventilation system
- ensuring you have at least one functioning carbon monoxide alarm in your home

Consider purchasing an air purifier that contains a HEPA filter. These devices can remove smoke from indoor air and those who are at risk will benefit most from using one in their home. There are many models available. It’s best to do some research and find an air purifier that’s appropriate for the size of the room you plan to use it in.

Learn more about choosing an air purifier that is appropriate for your needs.

Find clean cool air

If you can’t maintain clean air inside your home during a wildfire smoke event, be aware of locations in your community where you can find clean air. Libraries, shopping malls and community centres typically have filters and air conditioning that make them safe places to take a break from the smoke. For more information, contact your local health or emergency authorities. Please be sure to respect the COVID guidance on physical distancing from the local authorities in that area.

Find reliable information about wildfire conditions

There are a number of tools available to determine whether smoke is affecting

your air quality. Know where to find these tools and information about your local air quality.

Consult the air quality health index (AQHI) and learn how to use the AQHI to check air quality conditions in your community.

Satellite imagery is another advanced tool used to track smoke movements.

If your community is threatened by an approaching wildfire, your local health or emergency authorities will provide direction. Be prepared to evacuate at any time. If told to evacuate, do so.

Spending time outdoors during a wildfire smoke event

If you or members of your family spend time outdoors:

- learn how to check the local air quality conditions in your area to determine whether it is safe to be outdoors
- have a plan for limiting exposure to wildfire smoke if you will be caring for children or participating in any outdoor events
- review resources from your provincial or territorial workers compensation organization for guidance on how to work outside during wildfire season

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