

Air Pollution and Health Messages **DURING** a Poor Air Quality Event

A Resource for Municipal and Community Partners

Air Quality in Simcoe Muskoka is generally good. However poor air quality events do happen. Climate change can influence poor air quality. Municipal and community partners play a key role in communicating with the public about health risks and ways to protect health before and during a poor air quality event.



This document offers key messages that municipal and community partners can use or adapt to communicate with the public **DURING** an Air Quality Alert due to elevated levels of air pollutants (not related to wildfire smoke). These messages may need to be adjusted for different communities or groups. For any questions about air quality and health messages, contact the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit.

Key messages to communicate **DURING** a wildfire smoke event can be [found here](#).

Things to Communicate to the Public **DURING** an Air Quality Alert Due to Elevated Levels of Air Pollution (Not Related to Wildfire Smoke)

- Share information about air quality and air quality alerts to keep the public informed of the situation. Draw from email notifications received from SMDHU, Environment and Climate Change Canada or other reputable sources.
- Provide info about community resources available to support individuals to stay safe from wildfire smoke. For example, share information about the location, hours and accessibility of cleaner indoor air spaces.
- Share air quality and health protection key messages.
- Share additional resources with appropriate audiences.

Key Air Quality and Health Protection Messages for The Public **DURING** An Air Quality Event

The following key messages should be communicated with the general public **DURING** an Air Quality Event due to elevated levels of air pollutants (not related to wildfire smoke events):

- Air quality in Simcoe Muskoka is generally good. However, every day, most people are exposed to air pollution (e.g., traffic-related air pollution). The health effects of air pollution depend on the source. Long-term exposure to air pollution increases health risks.
- On days with high air pollution, you may experience tiredness, headache, or dizziness, coughing or sneezing, difficulty breathing, irritated eyes, nose, throat and skin and more muscles in the nose and throat. Air pollution can also worsen existing health conditions (e.g., worsen asthma symptoms).

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- While everyone can be affected, some groups have a greater risk of experiencing adverse health impacts because they are exposed more to air pollution and/or are more likely to experience symptoms or health effects when exposures. Generally, those who are most at risk include:



Older adults



Infants and young children



Pregnant people



People living with chronic health conditions
(e.g., lung, heart conditions, diabetes) or existing illnesses
(e.g., cancer)



People who smoke



People involved in strenuous outdoor exercise



People who work outdoors



People living with lower socio-economic status
(e.g., those with lower income, experience housing insecurity, experience uncertain employment).

Follow these tips to stay aware, reduce exposure and take care during air quality alerts due to elevated levels of air pollutants.

Stay Aware

- Check the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) and [air quality alerts](#) to help you make informed decisions. Follow the associated health messages for your risk level.
 - Use the www.weather.gc.ca webpage or the [WeatherCAN app](#).
 - Set up custom notifications on the WeatherCAN app or sign up to [receive alert emails](#).
- If you or someone else experiences symptoms, stop physical activity and seek cleaner air spaces. If someone could be having a heart attack, stroke or other medical emergency, call 911 immediately.

Reduce Exposure to Air Pollution

- Take it easy. Reduce or reschedule outdoor activities and strenuous physical activities. Use the AQHI to know the best times to be active and follow the AQHI health message for your risk level.

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- Create cleaner indoor air spaces where you live to reduce exposure to air pollution.
 - Keep windows and doors closed during times of high air pollution if indoor temperatures are comfortable (26°C or below).
 - Use the best quality air filter that your ventilation system can handle based on manufacturers' recommendations. Be sure to run the fan mode and put the system on recirculate.
 - [Protect your indoor air quality](#) as much as possible.
 - Use a [portable air cleaner](#) or DIY air cleaner to improve indoor air.
 - [Reduce sources of indoor air pollutants](#). Avoid smoking/vaping, burning wood/candles/incense, vacuuming, using harsh cleaning products or frying foods.
- Visit places with cleaner, cooler indoor air. Places include libraries, shopping malls, indoor swimming pools. Contact your local municipality or visit their website for hours and locations of cleaner indoor air spaces near you.
- When in a vehicle, keep windows closed with air conditioning set to recirculate.
- Help spare the air by taking steps to limit air pollution and make the air cleaner and healthier for everyone. When possible, reduce the number of car trips, avoid burning wood and other materials, and limit using gas-powered equipment or recreational vehicles.

Take Care

- Drink lots of water, as this helps your body cope with air pollution.
- Listen to your body and stop or reduce activity levels if you are experiencing symptoms, such as difficulty breathing or feeling unwell. Seek cleaner indoor air spaces.
- If you have an existing health condition, carry any rescue (fast-acting) medication. Follow your health management plan developed with a health care professional.
- Choose to exercise indoors in cleaner air spaces (e.g., indoor pool, gym) or in parks and greenspaces away from areas of high traffic where air pollution levels are often higher.

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If Poor Air Quality Events Overlap with Extreme Heat Events

Hot temperatures and humid air can lead to poor air quality or overlap with other sources of poor air quality events.

- Health risks may increase when hot temperatures and periods of poor air quality overlap.
- Pay attention to signs and symptoms of heat illness and poor air quality.
- Take steps to:
 - Protect yourself from extreme heat and poor air quality outdoors.
 - Protect indoor environments from overheating and poor air quality.
- If you must choose, prioritize keeping cool. Heat is usually more dangerous to health than short-term exposure to poor air quality.
 - If possible, use air conditioning to keep indoor temperatures below 26°C. If air conditioning is not available, it may not be safe to stay inside with doors and windows closed in the heat.
 - If you cannot stay cool inside, seek cooler, cleaner air spaces in your community (e.g., library, indoor pool, shopping mall). Being outdoors, especially in shaded green spaces is typically safer than staying in indoor environments that are too hot. Remember to listen to your body.
- Follow the guidance on [how to protect yourself from the health effects of extreme heat](#).

Explore related SMDHU resources and guidance to support your planning and response strategies for environmental health hazards (e.g., extreme heat, wildfire smoke) available [here!](#)

Please share the below with your networks as needed.

Additional Resources

- Please refer to SMDHU's websites (www.smdhu.org/airquality) and social media for up-to-date information regarding wildfire smoke events and tips on how to stay safe. Health Canada has [additional information](#).
- Call Health Connection at (705) 721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520 to speak with a health professional.
- Contact your local municipality or visit their website for hours and locations of cleaner indoor air spaces.

Additional Communications Materials for the General Public

- [Protecting your indoor air](#)
- [Using a portable air cleaner to improve indoor air](#)
- Select [air quality and health awareness resources](#)