

Wildfire Smoke and Health Messages DURING a Wildfire Smoke Event

A Resource for Municipal and Community Partners

Wildfire smoke events are becoming more frequent, severe, and prolonged due to climate change. Municipal and community partners play a key role in communicating with the public about health risks and way to protect health before and during these events.



This document offers key messages that municipal and community partners can use or adapt to communicate with the public DURING wildfire smoke events. These messages may need to be adjusted for different communities or groups. For any questions about wildfire smoke and health messages, contact the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU).

Things to Communicate to the Public DURING a Wildfire Smoke Event

- Share information about the wildfire smoke event, 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 information about community resources available to support individuals to stay safe from wildfire smoke. For example, share the location, hours and accessibility of cleaner indoor air spaces.
- Share wildfire smoke and health protection key messages.
- Share additional resources with appropriate audiences.

Key Wildfire Smoke and Health Protection Messages for The Public DURING a Wildfire Smoke Event

The following key messages should be communicated with the general public DURING a wildfire smoke event:

- Wildfire smoke is harmful to everyone’s health even at low concentrations.
- Some people are more likely to be at risk because they are exposed more to wildfire smoke and/or maybe more susceptible to experiencing health effects when exposed to wildfire smoke. In general, those who are most at risk of health effects of wildfire smoke 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).

- Wildfire smoke can be carried thousands of kilometers from a fire zone to affect local air quality. Wildfire smoke conditions can change quickly, differ across short distances, and can vary hour by hour.
- The best way to protect health is to reduce exposure to wildfire smoke.
- Wildfire smoke can enter the home and reduce indoor air quality. Steps can be taken to prevent wildfire smoke from entering the home, clean the air, and reduce sources of indoor air pollution.
- Wildfire smoke events can overlap with hot temperatures and humid air. Extreme heat is usually more dangerous than short-term exposure to poor air quality, even wildfire smoke. Prioritize staying cool if you must choose.

Wildfire Smoke and Health Messages **DURING** a Wildfire Smoke Event

A Resource for Municipal and Community Partners

Follow these tips to stay aware, reduce exposure, and take care **DURING** Wildfire Smoke Events

Stay Aware

- Check the [Air Quality Health Index](#) (AQHI), [air quality alerts](#) and other indicators of smoke levels in your community (e.g., www.firesmoke.ca) to help you make informed decisions. Use the www.weather.gc.ca webpage or the [WeatherCAN app](#) for AQHI and Alerts. Remember, wildfire smoke conditions can change quickly, so check the AQHI frequently.
- Monitor yourself and those around you for symptoms and health effects of wildfire smoke exposure. Know when to seek medical attention.

Milder and more common symptoms of wildfire smoke exposure include:

- Headaches
- Mild cough
- Production of mucus
- Eye, nose, throat and sinus irritation

In most cases, symptoms can be managed without medical intervention and typically go away when the smoke clears.

People who experience symptoms should stop physical activity and seek cleaner air.

More serious but less common symptoms of wildfire smoke exposure include:

- Dizziness
- Wheezing
- Chest pain
- Severe cough
- Asthma attacks
- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations

People with serious symptoms should seek medical attention.

In some cases, wildfire smoke can lead to stroke, heart attack, premature death, and prenatal complications.

If someone could be having a heart attack, stroke, or other medical emergency, call 911 immediately.

Reduce Exposure to Wildfire Smoke

- Take it easy. Consider reducing or rescheduling outdoor activities (especially strenuous physical) during wildfire smoke events. Follow health messages in the AQHI for your risk level.
- Create cleaner indoor air spaces where you live to reduce exposure to wildfire smoke.
 - Keep windows and doors closed during times of heavy smoke as much as possible (if indoor temperatures are comfortable: 26°C or below).
 - Use a clean, good-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.
 - Use a [portable air cleaner](#) or DIY air cleaner to improve indoor air.
 - [Protect your indoor air quality](#) as much as possible.
 - [Reduce sources of indoor air pollutants](#). Avoid smoking/vaping, burning wood/candles/incense, vacuuming, using harsh cleaning products or frying foods.
 - Additional guidance can be found in [section 5 \(Sheltering at Home\)](#) of Health Canada's Guidance for Cleaner Air Spaces.

Wildfire Smoke and Health Messages **DURING** a Wildfire Smoke Event

A Resource for Municipal and Community Partners



- 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.**
- 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.
- When in a vehicle, keep windows closed with air conditioning set to recirculate.
- A well-fitted respiratory-type mask (e.g., N95, NIOSH or equivalent) that does not have gaps between the mask and face can help **some people** (e.g., people who work outside), but they may not be right for everyone and do not reduce exposure to the gases in wildfire smoke. Follow Health Canada's guidance about [using a respiratory mask during wildfire smoke events](#).

Take Care

- Drink lots of water, as this helps your body cope with the smoke.
- Listen to your body. 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 asthma or other health condition, keep any rescue (fast-acting) medications on hand. Follow the AQHI health messages for at-risk populations.
- Check in on others, especially those more susceptible to wildfire smoke.
 - Check for and respond to signs of health effects from wildfire smoke.
 - Help others create cleaner indoor air spaces in their homes or help them access cleaner indoor air spaces in the community.
- It is normal to feel sad, anxious, stressed, or isolated during a wildfire smoke event. Eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising indoors in a place with cleaner air and staying connected with friends and family can help. Anyone having trouble coping should seek help from a friend, family member, community leader or health care provider. Check out these free resources: [Health 811](#); [Mental Health Support, Kids Help Phone](#); and [Hope for Wellness Helpline for Indigenous Peoples](#). Remember a wildfire smoke event may last a long time, but it will end.

Wildfire Smoke and Health Messages **DURING** a Wildfire Smoke Event

A Resource for Municipal and Community Partners



If Wildfire Smoke Events Overlap with Extreme Heat Events

Wildfire smoke events and hot temperatures or humid air can happen at the same time. **When extreme heat events occur with wildfire smoke, prioritize keeping cool because overheating can be more dangerous to health.**

- Health risks may increase when heat and wildfire smoke events overlap.
- Pay attention to signs and symptoms of heat illnesses and wildfire smoke exposure.
- Take steps to:
 - Protect yourself from extreme heat and wildfire smoke outdoors.
 - Protect your indoor environments from overheating and wildfire smoke.
- If you must choose, prioritize keeping cool. Heat is usually more dangerous to health than short-term exposure to poor air quality, even wildfire smoke.
 - 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, even during wildfire smoke events. Remember to listen to your body.

Please share the below with your networks as needed.

Additional Resources

- Please refer to SMDHU's websites (www.smdhu.org/airquality, www.smdhu.org/wildfiresmoke) 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](#)
- [Wildfire smoke and your health](#)
- [Wildfire smoke with extreme heat](#)
- [Preparing for wildfire smoke events](#)
- [Using a portable air cleaner to improve indoor air](#)
- [Using a respirator mask during wildfire smoke events](#)