

How to protect yourself from wildfire smoke



What is the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)?

Fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) from wildfires, woodstoves and many other sources impact our local air quality. The **Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)** is a colour scale to help us understand what normal air quality looks like, and how to adjust our activities when air quality worsens.

1-HOUR PM _{2.5} (µg/m ³)	PROVINCIAL AQHI	AQHI RISK CATEGORY	HEALTH MESSAGE FOR PEOPLE AT HIGHER RISK	HEALTH MESSAGE FOR GENERAL POPULATION	ACTIONS TO REDUCE WILDFIRE SMOKE EXPOSURE
0 – 10	1	LOW	Enjoy your usual outdoor activities.	Ideal air quality for outdoor activities.	Normal air quality in British Columbia
11 – 20	2				
21 – 30	3				
31 – 40	4	MODERATE	Consider reducing or rescheduling strenuous activities outdoors if you experience symptoms.	No need to modify your usual outdoor activities unless you experience symptoms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a portable air cleaner or DIY box fan air cleaner to reduce smoke in your home Stay inside with doors and windows closed, but keep cool – heat-related illness is more risky than breathing smoke for most people Visit places with cleaner and cooler air, such as libraries, community centres, and shopping malls Wear a well-fitted respirator (e.g. N95) outdoors.
41 – 50	5				
51 – 60	6				
61 – 70	7	HIGH	Reduce or reschedule strenuous activity outdoors.	Consider reducing or rescheduling strenuous activities outdoors if you experience symptoms.	
71 – 80	8				
81 – 90	9				
91 – 100	10				
101+	10+	VERY HIGH	Avoid strenuous activity outdoors.	Reduce or reschedule strenuous activity outdoors, especially if you experience symptoms.	

From BCCDC's [Wildfire smoke and the Air Quality Health Index \(AQHI\)](#) factsheet.

Who is most susceptible to smoke?

- People with chronic respiratory conditions (e.g., asthma or COPD)
- People with heart disease, diabetes or other chronic conditions
- Pregnant people, young children and older adults
- People with physically demanding jobs or who work outdoors

Find out more about using a respirator:



Individual reactions to smoky conditions may vary! Monitor your symptoms and keep an eye on local air quality to understand where your personal sensitivity lies.

What are the signs of smoke exposure and what should I do?

Mild	More Severe
Eye irritation, runny nose, sore throat, wheezing, mild cough, headaches	Shortness of breath, bad cough, dizziness, chest pain, fast beating/fluttering heart
Reduce exposure by reducing outdoor activity and implementing indoor air cleaning.	Call HealthLink BC (8-1-1), visit your health care provider, or go to a walk-in clinic or emergency department, depending on severity of symptoms.



Need extra support?

Community Virtual Care provides support for mild to moderate wildfire smoke-related illness particularly if you are immunocompromised or diagnosed with a chronic disease. A registered nurse will call you daily to assess your symptoms and connect you with other services. Learn more at the CVC webpage or call your local Community Access office (North Island: [1-866-928-4988](tel:1-866-928-4988); Central Island: [1-877-734-4101](tel:1-877-734-4101); South Island: [1-888-533-2273](tel:1-888-533-2273)).

How can I keep track of my local air quality?

Many communities now have access to local air quality information from **community air sensor networks** via the **AQMap**. Click on your nearest sensor to see the current AQHI and suggested actions for at-risk and healthy individuals.

During wildfire season, the Province and Island Health may issue an **Air Quality Warning** if extremely poor air quality is expected over a prolonged period (24-48 hours). You can sign up alerts using the QR code.

How do I reduce my exposure to smoke?

- Stay cool and drink plenty of fluids.
- If you have a chronic health condition, speak to your healthcare provider to create a management plan for smoke events, and stock up on at least 5 days worth of rescue medications.
- Use an air cleaner with a HEPA filter to lower indoor PM_{2.5}. If necessary, you can make your own DIY air cleaner using the QR code below.
- When outdoor air quality deteriorates, close doors and windows and ensure that your air conditioner, heat pump or other ventilation devices are set to recirculate (or turned off). Use your air cleaner(s) to create a cleaner air space in your home.
- Reduce indoor pollution sources, such as smoking.
- Well-fitted respirators provide some protection from outdoor smoke.
- Listen to your body during outdoor activity – if your breathing becomes difficult or uncomfortable, stop or reduce the activity.
- Find ways to socialize with others, exercise indoors and support your mental health during prolonged smoke events.

What if it's hot and smoky?

Heat generally causes more deaths on a hot day than smoke causes on a smoky day. However, many people impacted by heat are also impacted by smoke. If you belong to an at-risk group, **prioritize staying cool**. If you can't create a cooler, cleaner air space in your home, try visiting an air-conditioned public space or a cooling center.

Find your sensor on the **AQMap**



Sign up for **Air Quality alerts:**



Learn how to choose a **HEPA air cleaner:**



Learn how to make a **DIY Air Cleaner:**

