



Office of Health Emergency Management

The Facts on FIRES

Natural disasters are a part of life. In New Mexico, the threat of seasonal wildfires and flooding is a concern for all citizens statewide. The Office of Health Emergency Management (OHEM) has prepared fact sheets to help you understand the different types of natural disasters and their potential effect on you and your family.

Health Threats From Wild-fire Smoke

Smoke from wildfires is a mixture of gases and fine particles from burning trees and other plant materials. Smoke can hurt your eyes, irritate your respiratory system, and worsen chronic heart and lung diseases.

How to Tell If Smoke is Affecting you

Smoke can cause—

- Coughing
- A scratchy throat
- Irritated sinuses
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain

- Headaches
- Stinging eyes
- A runny nose

If you have heart or lung disease, smoke might make your symptoms worse.

People who have heart disease might experience—

- Chest pain
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue

Smoke may worsen symptoms for people who have pre-existing respiratory conditions, such as respiratory allergies, asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), in the following ways:

- Inability to breathe normally
- Cough with or without mucus
- Chest discomfort
- Wheezing and shortness of breath

When smoke levels are high enough, even healthy people may experience some of these symptoms.

How To Know If You Are At Risk

If you have heart or lung disease, such as congestive heart failure, angina, COPD, emphysema, or asthma, you are at higher risk of having health problems than healthy people. Older adults are more likely to be affected by smoke, possibly because they are more likely to have heart or lung diseases than younger people.

Children are more likely to be affected by health threats from smoke because their airways are still developing and because they breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults. Children also are more likely to be active outdoors.

How To Protect Yourself

Limit your exposure to smoke. Following are ways to protect your health:

Pay attention to local air quality reports. Listen and

watch for news or health warnings about smoke. Find out if your community provides reports about the Environmental Protection Agency's Air Quality Index (AQI). Also pay attention to public health messages about taking additional safety measures.

Refer to visibility guides if they are available. Not every community has a monitor that measures the amount of particles that are in the air. In the western part of the United States, some communities have guidelines to help people estimate AQI based on how far they can see.

If you are advised to stay indoors, keep indoor air as clean as possible. Keep windows and doors closed unless it is extremely hot outside. Run an air conditioner if you have one, but keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside. If you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed, seek shelter elsewhere.

Use a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter to reduce breathing problems. A HEPA filter may re-

duce the number of irritating fine particles in indoor air.

Do not add to indoor pollution. When smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles, fireplaces, or gas stoves. Do not vacuum, because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home. Do not smoke, because smoking puts even more pollution into the air.

If you have asthma or another lung disease, follow your doctor's advice about medicines and about your respiratory management plan. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

Dust masks are not enough. Paper "comfort" or "dust" masks commonly found at hardware stores are designed to trap large particles, such as sawdust. These masks will not protect your lungs from smoke.

Tips For Evacuating Safely

As you evacuate and then return home, be cautious and take the same safety measures you would when there is no emergency.

Buckle up and do not drink and drive.

Ensure that your children are properly buckled up and in the rear seat.

The most important things to do and remember are to: REMAIN CALM AND STAY INFORMED.

For more information on emergency health preparedness, contact the Office of Health Emergency Management (OHEM) at 505/476-7701 or visit our website at www.health.state.nm.us/ohem