

Smoke: What is it, how can it affect you, and what you can do?



What is Smoke?

Smoke is a complex mixture of carbon dioxide, water vapor, carbon monoxide, particulate matter,

hydrocarbons and other organic chemicals, nitrogen oxides, and metals. This mixture can irritate and even injure the mouth, nose, throat, and lung tissue.

Symptoms of Smoke Exposure

In healthy people, symptoms of smoke exposure usually include irritation of eyes, nose and throat or breathing discomfort. More severe symptoms may include chest tightness, wheezing, shortness of breath, and coughing.

If you have asthma, a chronic lung disease, or cardiovascular disease, smoke exposure can aggravate these conditions. In smoky conditions, if you develop symptoms which do not respond to your usual medication, see your health care provider immediately.

Prolonged exposure to smoke of all kinds is harmful to people of all ages. Like cigarette smoke, smoke from fires can eventually damage

your body's ability to remove large particles and excess phlegm from your lungs and airway. But, the healthy lung has a great ability to recover from the effects of smoke, provided there is time to recover.

Protection recommendations:

Look: Assess visibility

Sometimes air quality monitors are not located in the area you are in. If you see smoke nearby, how thick and close it is may help you decide what to do. The following steps and chart are guidelines for judging air quality by using visibility to see how close and thick the smoke may be.

Steps for Determining Smoke Concentrations Based on Visibility

1. Face away from the sun.
2. Determine the limit of your visibility range by looking for objects at known distances (miles).
3. Visible range is that point at which even the high contrast objects totally disappear.
4. After determining visibility in miles, use the chart to decide the cautionary category.

Caution Category	Visibility in Miles
Good	10 miles or more
Moderate	6 to 9
Unhealthy for Sensitive People	3 to 5
Unhealthy	1½ to 2½
Very Unhealthy	1 to 1¼
Hazardous	¾ mile or less

Act: Make a decision that is right for you

After deciding how thick the smoke is you can act by following these recommendations.



When the category of visibility is 'Unhealthy for Sensitive People' or worse, take these steps:

1. If you are sensitive to smoke, evacuate the area if you can. If you choose to stay, remain indoors with the doors and windows closed.
2. If available, use a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter on your air conditioner to reduce the

amount of smoke pulled into your home from the outdoors. A HEPA filter may reduce the number of irritating fine particles in indoor air. Do not use swamp coolers when there are high levels of smoke outdoors because this type of cooler will pull the smoke indoors.

3. During high temperatures, older individuals or those in frail health who do not have an air conditioner are advised to stay with family members or friends who do.
4. Reduce other sources of indoor air pollution such as smoking cigarettes or burning incense.
5. Recognize the symptoms of smoke exposure and pay attention to visibility.
6. For severe shortness of breath, chest pain, decreased mental function or other life-threatening conditions, call 911 immediately.
7. Listen for news updates on the fire and smoke in your area. Continue to follow all precautions and instructions given by fire management authorities.

For more information about smoke and fires go to: New Mexico Fires website: <http://nmfireinfo.wordpress.com>