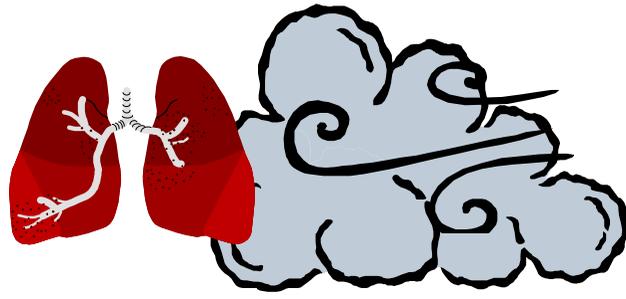


Dust Storms and Health



What Everyone Should Know

Health Information for
Doña Ana County

New Mexico Environment Department



New Mexico Department of Health



March 2000

Why should I be concerned about dust storms?

Dust storms can cause a number of serious health problems and they can make some health problems worse. Dust is made up of tiny solid particles ("particulate matter") floating in the air. These tiny particles can get past the lungs' natural defenses and build up. This can harm sensitive lung tissue. Of course, during severe dust storms, more dust can get into the lungs.

Dust irritates the lungs and can trigger allergic reactions, as well as asthma attacks. In people who already have these problems these attacks can be serious and cause breathing problems. Dust can cause coughing, wheezing and runny noses. Some groups of people are more sensitive to dust than others. Finally, breathing a lot of dust over a long period of time can cause chronic breathing and lung problems.

Who should take special precautions?

Anyone can potentially be harmed by breathing too much dust. However, the following groups are at the highest risk:

- infants, children, and teens
- elderly
- people with asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, or other respiratory conditions
- people with heart disease
- pregnant women
- healthy adults working or exercising vigorously outdoors (for example, agricultural workers, construction workers, and runners)

What can I do to protect myself and others?

The best precaution is simply to avoid going outside during severe dust storms. If you must go out, spend as little time outside as possible, and avoid hard exercise. Wearing some type of covering over your nose and mouth can provide some protection from large particles. However, since the small dust particles are the most harmful, staying out of the dust is the best solution.

How will I know if there is a problem?

For you, the easiest way to tell if there may be a problem is if you see a lot of dust. For instance, if the blowing dust is so thick that it's hard to see the mountains, then that could mean that dust levels might be harmful right now. More detail on federal standards plus the previous days particulate matter levels can be found by visiting the New Mexico Environment Department web site.

Doña Ana County has between 6 to 18 days per year when dust levels are too high according to federal health standards. This number varies from place to place and from year to year depending on weather conditions.

What causes dust storms?

Dust storms are caused by a combination of weather conditions, features of the natural environment, and human activity. High winds can raise large amounts of dust from areas of dry, loose, exposed soil. In this area, high winds are most common during the months of January through April. Most dust storms last about 4 hours.

For more information:

New Mexico Environment Department

www.nmenv.state.nm.us

Click on "Air Quality Bureau"

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