

August 20, 2010

Wildfire Smoke and Your Health

Alberta has experienced episodes of very poor air quality since Thursday August 19. The smoke in the air is due to the uncontrolled fires in British Columbia and the prevailing winds. While variable, air quality is expected to be very poor at times over the weekend.

What is in smoke from wildfires?

Smoke from wildfires is made up of very small particles from burning trees and other plant material, gases and water vapor.

Is wildfire smoke bad for me?

Minor smoke conditions do not typically cause health concerns in most healthy individuals; however individuals with respiratory conditions such as COPD and asthma, and existing cardiovascular conditions such as angina, previous heart attack and congestive heart failure, may be more likely to notice a worsening of their symptoms.

If smoke conditions become more severe, even healthy individuals may experience irritation of eyes, throat and possibly shortness of breath.

All Albertans – and particularly those with existing respiratory conditions - are encouraged to monitor their own symptoms, and seek medical attention if symptoms worsen.

How do I know if wildfire smoke is affecting me?

You may develop or notice some of the following symptoms:

- increased coughing
- irritated sinuses and runny nose
- a scratchy throat
- headaches
- stinging feeling in your eyes
- shortness of breath
- feeling of unusual tiredness

How can I protect myself?

Individuals with existing respiratory conditions are advised to take the precautions and steps they normally do when experiencing worsened respiratory symptoms.

All Albertans are encouraged to monitor their own health, and adapt their activities as necessary.

A few helpful tips:

- **Monitor local air quality conditions**
 - Current air quality and the Air Quality Index (AQI) can be accessed at Alberta Environment's website at <http://www.envinfo.gov.ab.ca/AirQuality> or by calling the toll-free information number at 1-877-247-7333
 - Visit www.albertahealthservices.ca for the latest health advisories.
- **If symptoms develop, minimize or stop your outdoor activities, particularly those involving strenuous exercise.**
- **If you choose to stay indoors, or are advised to “shelter in place”, keep indoor air as clean as possible:**
- **Shelter in place instructions:**
 - Close and lock all outside windows and doors, including attached garage doors
 - Turn down furnace thermostats and furnace fans to the minimum setting. Do not attempt to extinguish pilot light.
 - If you have an air-conditioner, keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside.
 - Avoid running fans, such as “whole-house fans” or “fresh air ventilation systems”, that bring more smoky outdoor air inside.
 - Switch all floor registers to closed position
 - Close fire place dampers on wood burning fireplaces
- **Don't add to indoor air pollution** by using or doing anything that burns and adds more smoke, like smoking inside the house, using candles, gas stoves, frying food, or fireplaces. Don't vacuum while there is a smoke advisory because vacuuming will stir up any dust particles already inside your home.
- **Don't rely on dust masks for protection.** The paper dust masks that you might use to keep out large particles like sawdust will not protect your lungs from smoke.

For more information or advice, call HealthLink Alberta to speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at 780-408-LINK (5465) or at the toll-free 1-866-408-LINK (5465). In case of severe symptoms, seek emergency medical attention.