Awair's Wildfire Smoke Guide

9 Steps to Protect Your Health

When wildfires cause air pollution alerts in your area, it can be difficult to know what to do to stay healthy and how to keep your home pollution-free. We've created this 9-step guide to help you breathe easier and stay one step ahead this season.

1 Track Air Quality Reports for Your Area

Wildfire smoke can travel thousands of miles away from its source and impact air quality on a national scale. In 2018, the smoke from 15 California wildfires traveled all the way to the East Coast — a 2,530 mile journey. With that in mind, it's exceptionally important to stay alert to news of wildfires, even if you're not located within the evacuation zone.

To track the air quality status in your neighborhood, visit the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) AirNow database. This site provides the current Air Quality Index (AQI) value for your city, national and local air pollution maps, air quality forecasts, and alerts for "Action Days" when air pollution poses a significant health hazard.

2 Limit Your Outdoor Time

It may sound simple, but the best thing you can do to keep yourself safe from wildfire smoke is to reduce your exposure. That means staying indoors, closing windows and vents, and taking steps to maintain the health of your indoor air.

That said, indoor air isn't always as clean as we assume — especially when wildfires worsen outdoor pollution levels. When wildfires broke out around northern and central California last year, average indoor PM2.5 levels in San Francisco rose well beyond the national health standard.

3 Take Precautions to Keep Indoor Air Clean

The biggest way that outdoor pollution infiltrates your home is through open windows and ventilation systems. Bathroom fans, kitchen fans, heating systems, air conditioning (HVAC) systems, air filters, and other ventilation devices that connect to the outdoors provide a direct avenue for fine dust to enter into your living space. To safeguard your health, close windows and vents and change your HVAC settings to recirculate indoor air rather than taking in fresh air from outdoors.

4 Change Your Habits

Sealing off your home to the outdoors is a great first step, but it's typically not enough to maintain healthy indoor air quality. The fine particulate matter found in wildfire smoke can also be tracked into your home on your shoes, clothing, and pets. On top of this, common household activities can generate pollution which is difficult to get rid of without your usual ventilation options.

To reduce indoor dust and chemical levels:

- Take shoes and jackets off at the door so as not to track dust further into your home.
- Wipe down pets with a damp cloth after going out for a walk.
- Refrain from smoking cigarettes, e-cigarettes, or other smoking devices inside.
- Avoid using your broiler or frying foods to limit the amount of indoor pollution you generate.
- Avoid burning candles or using aerosol-based products that are difficult to ventilate out of the air.
- Don't vacuum unless your vacuum uses a HEPA filter that can trap fine dust.
- Wipe down surfaces in your home with a damp cloth to reduce dust.

5 Create a "Clean Room"

No matter how careful you are, engaging in some pollution-generating activities such as cooking and cleaning may be unavoidable. Creating a "clean room" is a great way to get symptom relief and carve out a healthy air zone within your home

The room you choose should have a door and be large enough for everyone in the household to fit comfortably. Bedrooms make great clean rooms because they're generally removed from the main kitchen and living area and are easy to close off from the rest of the house.

Next, shut all the windows and set up a fan and an air purifier. The fan will help circulate air, disperse CO2 generated by occupants, and keep you cool while the windows are closed and the AC is shut off. The air purifier will filter fine dust, bacteria, and other pollutants from your air to help you stay healthy. For the best results, make sure that your purifier and filter is certified to trap fine dust and keep it running continuously on the highest fan setting.

6 Swap Out Your Filters

If you have central air in your home, upgrading your filters is a quick and easy way to improve your indoor air quality. Filters are typically rated using a Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value, or MERV score. For residential filters, MERV scores can range from zero to twenty. The higher the rating, the better the filter is at capturing fine dust particles such as PM2.5. Most central air systems come with a standard 1" fiberglass filter with a MERV rating between one and four. This filter can be swapped out for a minimum efficiency filter (MERV 5-8) or a high efficiency filter (MERV 9+). Filters that are HEPA certified (high efficiency particulate air) are the gold standard, with a MERV rating between 17 and 20. Changing from a lowefficiency filter to one with a MERV score of at least 13 can reduce fine dust particles in your home by up to 95 percent.

7 Don't Rely on a Dust Mask

As wildfires become more frequent and pollution levels continue to rise around the globe, demand for pollution masks has soared. Although wearing a mask can prevent you from inhaling large particles and debri, most standard dust masks don't offer adequate protection against fine dust (PM2.5) — the small particles in smoke that pose the biggest danger to your health.

Investing in a N95-rated particulate respirator mask may be a good idea for a quick commute or run to the grocery store during a pollution alert, but remember that these masks aren't 100 percent effective. For a mask to truly reduce the health risks associated with exposure, it must be able to filter fine dust and fit perfectly on your face — something which is difficult to achieve, especially for kids and adults with facial hair.

8 Consult Your Doctor

For certain at-risk populations such as children, elderly, and sick, high airborne pollution levels pose a much more serious and immediate health risk. If you're the parent of a young child or have an existing heart, lung, or respiratory condition, ask your doctor about your unique risks and what steps you can take to reduce your likelihood of developing an infection.

9 Monitor Your Indoor Air Quality

When it comes to your indoor air quality, knowledge is power. An air quality monitor can help you understand exactly what pollutants are in your air and how different household activities are impacting the health of your space.

As you browse different solutions, look for an air quality monitor that can alert you when air readings become unhealthy and can connect with other devices and home systems to automatically make adjustments.

Know Your Air

Awair makes it easy to know your air and take control of your indoor air quality. To learn about our monitors and how they can empower you to live healthier this wildfire season, visit getawair.com.