

Health Effects of Smoke Exposure due to Forest Fires

Exposure to smoke can quickly result in sore eyes, tears, cough and runny nose. If the smoke lasts several days to weeks or is very heavy, more serious lung problems and long-lasting cough may occur.

The smallest particles within the smoke constitute the unhealthiest material. These are the ones that go deeper into the lungs. Small particles trigger coughing and make it harder to breathe. Exposure to smoke can also cause worsening of heart and lung diseases like asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and congestive heart failure. Elders and young infants are also at increased risk.

Here are some things you can do if smoke becomes a problem in your community:

1. Stay inside as much as possible, with the windows and doors closed.
2. Don't smoke. Stay away from people who do.
3. If you have room air cleaners with HEPA filters, turn them on.
4. Don't use wood stoves, gas stoves and even candles. This can make the indoor air quality worse.
5. When you are in your car or truck, keep the windows closed and put the air system on "recirculate" so you don't suck smoky air inside.
6. Have several-days supply of nonperishable groceries that do not require cooking, since cooking (especially frying and broiling) can add to indoor pollutant levels.
7. Drink lots of water so that your nose and mouth are kept moist for easier breathing.
8. Be alert to Public Service Announcements.
9. Be aware that outdoor events, such as athletic games or competitions, may be postponed or cancelled if smoke levels become elevated.
10. If you experience chest tightness, chest pain, shortness of breath or severe fatigue, consult with your community health nurse or doctor. You should do this even if you don't have previous heart or lung problems.
11. Avoid working or exercising outside, and stop if it makes you feel tired. Limit the amount of time your children play outdoors.

12. If you have neighbors, friends or relatives that live alone, check periodically to make sure they are OK. Elders and people with heart or lung conditions may get sick from the smoke. When doors and windows are kept closed to keep the smoke out, houses may also get very hot. This can lead to heat exhaustion or heatstroke. Use fans to move air around inside the house.
13. Most masks are not helpful. The harmful particles are so small they can go right around or through them. Staying indoors with the windows closed remains the best option.

People with heart or lung conditions can also do the following:

1. If you have asthma, heart or lung disease, be especially careful about monitoring your condition. Take all of the medicine you are supposed to take, and do everything your nurse or doctor tells you to do. Make sure you have a week's supply of your medication available.
2. If you plan to use a portable air cleaner, buy one appropriately matched to room size, as specified by the manufacturer, before a smoke emergency occurs.
3. Talk to your nurse or doctor if you have any other concerns about your health. You can also call Tele-Care NWT: 1-888-255-1010 or 1-888-255-8211 (TDD/TTY).

For further information:

Contact the Office of The Chief Medical Health Officer at (867) 920-8877.

Visit the following websites:

www.hlthss.gov.nt.ca – NWT Department of Health and Social Services

<http://forestmanagement.enr.gov.nt.ca/> – NWT Department of Environment and Natural Resources