



Public Health Division

County of Santa Cruz

HEALTH SERVICES AGENCY

POST OFFICE BOX 962, 1080 Emeline Ave., SANTA CRUZ, CA 95061-0962
TELEPHONE: (831) 454-4000 FAX: (831) 454-4488 TDD: Call 711

Press Release

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Contact: Corinne Hyland, PIO

Phone: 831-566-4370

AIR QUALITY EVENTS GUIDANCE

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY: The recent unprecedented fires and dense smoke are the result of years of impacts brought on by climate change. The best public health strategy is to be aware that heavy smoke will be in our future and for people to prepare themselves, their home, their loved ones, and community for smoke events. When heavy, dense smoke blankets the region, there is no one public health solution that can be widely applied.

PREPAREDNESS

- Stay informed by signing up for alerts from Cal Fire, your city or county, local air quality district, or local public health department.
- Weatherize homes and buildings in preparation for wildfires by replacing or refurbishing old leaky windows and doors; use caulking to seal the openings.
- Consider purchasing a non-ozone-producing air purifier (HEPA) to create a cleaner air room in your home, or consider purchasing a MERV 13 or greater filter for your HVAC system to be used when experiencing a heavy smoke event.
- Consider upgrading to an HVAC system that allows for both heating and cooling. Be sure it includes a mechanism to switch to “recirculate” to prevent smoke from entering the space.
- Create a personal, family, or group emergency plan, gather emergency supplies, and be ready to evacuate.

INDIVIDUALS WITH HEALTH CONDITIONS

- Individuals with health conditions should talk to their physicians to develop a personal plan for dealing with smoke.
- Elderly persons, pregnant individuals, children, and individuals with cardiovascular disease or respiratory illnesses are particularly susceptible to elevated air pollution levels and should take extra precautions to avoid exposure.
- Those with heart or lung disease, older adults, pregnant individuals, and children should avoid prolonged or heavy exertion, and should either reschedule outdoor activities or move them to another location. All individuals should avoid outdoor activity, including exercise, during air quality events.

- Elevated particulate matter in the air can trigger wheezing in those who suffer from asthma, emphysema, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), or other respiratory conditions.
- Asthmatics should follow their asthma management plan.
- Keep up to two weeks' worth of extra medication on hand. Be ready with plans to treat asthma or diabetes when there is smoke.
- Individuals should contact their physician if they have cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms believed to be caused by smoke. Concerned individuals should consult their physician for personalized recommendations.
- Consider leaving the affected area if there is a prolonged heavy smoke event

DURING SMOKE EVENTS

- Shelter in place. Staying indoors with windows and doors closed, where air quality is better, is the best way to protect your health. During high heat and heavy smoke events, keep indoor air cool or visit an air-cooling center.
- Plan to go to a cleaner air location if you are unable to seal your home or if dense smoke occurs during hot weather events and you cannot stay in your home.
- If you are in an affected area and need to leave your home, ensure you practice physical distancing, cover your cough, wash your hands frequently, and always wear face coverings to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Set air conditioning units and car vent systems to re-circulate to prevent outside air from moving inside.
- Smoke can irritate the eyes and airways, causing cough, a dry scratchy throat, runny nose, trouble breathing, and irritated sinuses. Stay hydrated by drinking water during heavy smoke events.
- Avoid adding additional air pollution by curtailing activities, such as wood burning, lawn mowing, leaf blowing, driving, barbecuing, smoking, or other dust-producing activities. Avoid using hairspray and painting indoors. If possible, use the stove fan when cooking.

ABOUT MASKS

- COVID-19 is circulating in our community and the best way to protect yourself from the virus and poor air quality is to stay indoors. Face coverings should be worn if in proximity to others outside your household, both indoor and outdoor.
- Bandanas, cloth masks, and typical surgical masks do nothing to protect against wildfire smoke particles, but are recommended community wide to protect each other from COVID-19.
- Taking a mask on and off can cause fine particulate matter and virus particles to build up in the mask, which the wearer will breathe when it is put back on the face.

