

Your Health and Living With Smoky Skies

Frequently Asked Questions

Forest fires are an inevitable part of living in the southern interior of British Columbia. Smoke can affect each person differently, based on his or her health, age and exposure. Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about smoke exposure.

Q. Is it safe to go outside?

A. Use common sense regarding outdoor physical activity – if breathing becomes difficult or uncomfortable, stop or reduce the activity. If you experience irritation of eyes, nose or throat, shortness of breath or other respiratory symptoms, take action to reduce your exposure. If symptoms worsen, contact a medical professional. Concentrations of smoke can change dramatically within short distances and short periods of time. Let your symptoms be your guide.

Q. Should I stay inside?

A. Smoke levels may be lower indoors; however, because gases and the smallest particles found in smoke can penetrate buildings, levels of smoke indoors will not be zero. If you stay indoors be aware of heat exposure or visit a location like a shopping mall with cooler filtered air.

Q. How can I protect myself from the smoke inside my home?

A. Staying indoors may help you stay cool and provide some relief from the smoke, however many air conditioning systems do not filter the air or improve indoor air quality. Commercially available HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters can further reduce poor indoor air quality near the device. Keep indoor air cleaner by avoiding smoking or burning other materials. If your home is not air-conditioned, be sure that indoor temperatures do not become excessive if you close your windows and doors to keep out smoke. Exposure to too much heat can result in illness; stay cool and drink plenty of fluids.

Q. What information can the Air Quality Health Index provide?

A. The Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) is designed to indicate the health risk associated with multiple pollutants. The Air Quality Health Index may not be the best source of information during a forest fire. During forest fires, smoke plumes may affect entire valleys or a relatively small area.

Smoke conditions can change rapidly depending upon wind speed and direction. The air-quality monitoring network may not serve as a reliable indicator of smoke levels.

Q. What can I do if smoke is affecting my health?

A. Additional to the above, conditions may vary dramatically by area or elevation and you may be able to reduce your exposure by moving to cleaner air. Residents with asthma or chronic illness should activate their asthma or personal care plan. Pay attention to local air quality reports, air quality may be poor even though smoke may not be visible. Those with symptoms should seek medical attention by visiting their doctor, a walk-in clinic or the emergency department depending upon the severity of symptoms.

For more information: HealthLink BC Toll Free 8-1-1 24 hours, <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/> or our website www.interiorhealth.ca