

Emergency Social Services

Self-Evacuations Due to Air Quality Impacts on Health

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(Messaging developed in collaboration with Northern Health)

Smoky conditions persist in many communities due to wildfire activity in the region. Northern Health understands some residents with asthma or other chronic illness may consider self-evacuating in search of clearer air.

Northern Health is working with the First Nations Health Authority, Ministry of Health, Emergency Management BC, and Emergency Social Services (ESS) to support those with pre-existing health conditions who have concerns about smoke exposure.

Please do not hesitate to seek medical attention at a local hospital or health centre, if you feel your condition is getting worse due to smoke exposure.

Whether to self-evacuate

The best way to protect yourself from smoke is to reduce your exposure. Sheltering in place (staying where you are) is a more reliable way of reducing your exposure than evacuating, but only if you have access to a clean indoor air environment in your home, or in your community. Because smoky conditions shift and move, self-evacuating to another community does not guarantee that your exposure will be reduced, and it adds a lot of stress and anxiety that can also have negative health effects. A clean indoor air environment in your home or community protects you from smoke regardless of where it moves, and minimizes the stress and anxiety related to evacuation.

Support for self-evacuated residents

Residents who choose to self-evacuate because they are experiencing health effects from smoke exposure (such as those with pre-existing health conditions, the elderly, infants, children and pregnant women) should go to their nearest reception centre and register with Emergency Social Services.

Self-evacuees will receive short-term (up to three days) ESS support in the form of lodging (hotel, group lodging or billeting) and meals (vouchers). If, the need for longer-term support is

required at the end of the first three days, the situation will be re-assessed. Self-evacuees do **not** require a medical assessment or doctor's note to access this short-term support.

Smoky Skies Bulletins

There may be smoky days ahead of us across the region – you can find the latest Ministry of Environment [Smoky Skies bulletins here](#), including tips for reducing your personal health risk.

Reducing exposure to wildfire smoke is the best way to protect your health.

- Most people spend more than 80% of their time indoors, so clean indoor air is important.
- Purchase a high quality portable air cleaner that uses HEPA filtration to remove smoke from the indoor air. Different units treat different volumes of air, so do your research to get something suitable for your space. Electrostatic precipitators can also be effective, but they produce trace amounts of ozone that might irritate sensitive lungs.
- If you have forced air heating and/or air conditioning, talk to your service provider about what filters and settings to use during smoky conditions.
- Know where to find cleaner air in your community. Libraries, community centres, and shopping malls often have cooler, filtered air that can provide a respite from outdoor smoke.
- Understand that the harder you breathe the more smoke you inhale. Plan to take it easy, keep your respiration rate low, and drink plenty of water if it gets smoky.

Be aware of people who should take extra care, including anyone with chronic conditions such as asthma, heart disease, or diabetes, as well as pregnant women, infants, young children, and the elderly.

- If you or members of your family have a chronic disease, work with your doctor to create a management plan for smoky periods.
- If you use rescue medications of any kind, ensure that you have an adequate supply at home and start carrying them at times when you hear about fires in the news. Have a clear plan to follow if your rescue medications cannot bring your condition under control.
- If you are going to be pregnant or caring for an infant through the summer months, make a plan for minimizing smoke exposures if they occur.

Some people have to be outside during smoky conditions, but there are still ways to reduce smoke exposure and its health impacts.

- If you are an outdoor worker, use resources from [WorkSafe BC](#). Talk to your occupational health and safety specialists about what type of respirator you need before the season starts. You must be professionally fitted in advance for any respirator to be used in smoky conditions.
- If you care for groups of children or plan outdoor events, ensure that your organization establishes a smoke plan before the wildfire season begins so that you can make clear and transparent decisions if air quality becomes a concern.
- There are many tools available to help you understand the air quality impacts of smoke. Bookmarking sources of good information is an important part of staying protected.
- The provincial webpage for [Smoky Skies Bulletins](#) is updated at least once every 24 hours when fires are actively burning.
- The current Air Quality and Health Index (AQHI) maps for [all of BC](#) and/or for [Metro Vancouver](#) provide health-specific messaging for smoky conditions.
- If you live somewhere without an AQHI reading, check the [current map of fine particulate matter concentrations](#) or PM_{2.5} instead.
- The [FireWork Smoke Forecast](#) shows maps of predicted ground-level PM_{2.5} impacts over the next 48 hours.
- The provincial map of [Active Wildfires](#) can help you keep track of the current situation, especially during hot and windy weather when fires can start and spread rapidly.
- Extreme wildfires often occur when it is very hot outside, which can also affect your health. You can sign up for the [EC Alert Me](#) service to receive email warnings from the national weather office about extreme temperatures and other important weather events.
- Install the [Air Quality Health Index \(AQHI\) Canada app](#) on your Android or iOS device to monitor your area, and to get notifications when air quality changes.

C/O British Columbia Lung Association