

Smoke Exposure from Wildfires - How to Protect Yourself

The Canadian Wildfires have resulted in a smoke clouds extending over much of New York State from the border all the way to New York City. Members have expressed concerns about their safety during this unprecedented event. According to the EPA, if you are healthy, you're usually not at a major risk from short-term exposures to smoke. However, there are a number of things you can do to protect yourself from smoke exposure.

1. Vulnerable people
 - a. Heart, lung, respiratory, allergies, asthma – should avoid going outside, and take extra precautions
2. Use your weather app to check the Air Quality Index (AQI). You may also set it for alerts to let you know when the levels exceed a safe level.
 - a. AQI range: an AQI value of 50 or below represents good air quality, at 150 sensitive individuals may feel health effects, and AQI value over 300 represents hazardous air quality.
 - b. Keep children inside for AQI over 50, especially if they have asthma
3. Outdoors
 - a. Avoid being outside for long periods of time, and limit outdoor physical activity
 - b. If you are outside – wear an N95 mask
 - c. Those who work outside for long periods may need higher level PPE such as Powered Air-Purifying Respirators (PAPR)
4. Indoors
 - a. Close windows and set system to recirculate air if possible
 - i. Do the same when you are in your car
 - b. Use high efficiency filters, such as MERV 13 filters, to remove small particles from the air
 - i. Due to COVID-19, many State buildings upgraded to MERV-13 filters and higher efficiency ventilation systems. Your Human Resources Department or Building Management can provide this information.
 - c. Portable air purifiers with HEPA filters may be used in small spaces
 - i. Avoid air purifiers that emit ozone

For questions on telecommuting or use of accruals, please contact your Field Representative. To call your Regional Office to find out who your Field Representative is see <https://www.pef.org/regions/> or call (800) 342-4306 or (518) 785-1900. Please contact the PEF Health and Safety Department with any additional questions at HealthAndSafety@pef.org or 518-785-1900, ext 254.

Resources:

New York Times: “Wildfires Are Intensifying. Here’s How to Protect Your Health”
<https://www.nytimes.com/explain/2022/08/01/well/wildfire-smoke-safety> (behind paywall)

EPA – Wildfires and Indoor Air Quality (IAQ)
<https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/wildfires-and-indoor-air-quality-iaq>

AQI (Air Quality Index) Basics
<https://www.airnow.gov/aqi/aqi-basics/>
CDC – Natural Disasters/Wildfires
<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/wildfires/links.html>
NYS DEC Air Quality Health Advisory
<https://www.dec.ny.gov/press/127840.html>

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