

For Immediate Release | August 11, 2017

## Use of face masks during wildfire events

Interior Health (IH) has received a number of inquiries from the public about the use of face masks for protection against wildfire smoke. IH would like to emphasize the best protection for the public is to reduce overall exposure to smoke, recognizing masks have their limitations.

For example, paper dust masks found at retail stores do not provide protection from the particles found in smoke. Individuals have also inquired about specialized face masks known as N95 respirators. While certified N95 respirators can filter tiny particles out of inhaled air, they are not recommended in most circumstances for the following reasons:

- They must be properly fitted to each user to ensure protection. This process generally takes 20-30 minutes under the guidance of a professional with special equipment.
- Breathing is more challenging when wearing these masks, which is a concern for those with respiratory issues.
- There are no certified N95 respirators on the market designed to fit the faces of children.
- They stop working if saturated with water or sweat.

The exception to the above would be individuals who work outdoors. They may benefit from the use of N95 masks provided that they have been properly fitted by a professional.

The best thing people can do is [monitor the air quality in their area](#), take the steps to reduce smoke exposure, and monitor their symptoms.

Actions to reduce smoke exposure:

- When at home ensure that air conditioners are on recirculate and consider using a portable air cleaner equipped with a HEPA filter or an electrostatic precipitator
- Keep windows and doors closed when possible
- Seek out public spaces with cleaner air, such as shopping malls or community centres
- Limit your time outside
- Reduce activity in smoky environments: the harder you breathe, the more smoke you inhale
- Stay cool, drink plenty of water

Smoke can affect each person differently, based on his or her health, age, and exposure. Smoke exposure is particularly a concern for those who have underlying medical conditions such as asthma, COPD, heart disease, or diabetes. It is also a concern for pregnant women, infants, young children, and the elderly. When smoke levels become very high, even healthy people can be affected and everyone should be monitoring their symptoms and taking appropriate action to protect their health.

Symptoms to monitor:

- Difficulty breathing

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- Chest pain and discomfort
  - Coughing
  - Irritated eyes, nose, and throat

If you are experiencing symptoms and are concerned contact your health care provider or walk-in clinic. If your symptoms are severe, seek emergency medical attention.

For more information on air quality and wildfire smoke visit our website

[https://www.interiorhealth.ca/YourEnvironment/EmergencyPreparedness/Major\\_Events/Pages/Air-Quality.aspx](https://www.interiorhealth.ca/YourEnvironment/EmergencyPreparedness/Major_Events/Pages/Air-Quality.aspx)

Information on exposure to smoke in the workplace and minimizing worker exposure is available on the WorkSafeBC website. <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/information-sheets/wildfire-smoke-frequently-asked-questions-faq?lang=en>.

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