

USING FACE MASKS DURING WILDFIRE SMOKE EVENTS

Wildfire Smoke

There are negative health effects associated with breathing smoky air. Wildfire smoke contains particulate matter and, when we breathe it into our lungs, it can cause health problems. Smoke is especially problematic for those with breathing, heart, and circulation illnesses (e.g. asthma, COPD, heart failure).

Healthy people can also be affected, particularly pregnant women, children, the elderly and outdoor workers. The fire does not have to be close for you to be affected. If the skies are smoky, you could be at risk.

Limitations of Face Masks and Particulate Respirators

The best way to protect the health of yourself and your family during smoky sky events is to seek cleaner air. You can buy a HEPA air cleaner for a room in your home, you can go to a building with a good air filtration system, or you can leave the area. If this is not practical, it may help to simply stay indoors and reduce your physical activity.

There are face masks called **particulate respirators** that can be worn to stop some of the tiny, dangerous particles found in wildfire smoke from getting into your lungs. These masks are not recommended in most circumstances because they:

- may make it difficult to breathe normally,
- can be risky for elderly people and those with existing breathing or heart conditions,
- do not fit children's faces properly,
- cannot be worn properly by people with facial hair, and
- stop working if they get saturated with water or sweat.



If you want to wear a particulate respirator, speak with your physician prior to a smoke event. Outdoor workers should refer to their occupational health and safety policies and procedures.

Surgical and paper masks found at the drug or hardware store do not provide protection from the particles in smoke.

For Those Who Chose to Wear a Mask

If you need to be outside during a smoke event and want to wear a mask:

- choose one labeled 'N95'
- it should be labeled 'particulate respirator'
- follow the fit instructions
- take regular breaks from wearing the mask so your body can recover from the increased breathing effort required
- discard used and dirty masks regularly



For more information, visit the Interior Health webpage at www.interiorhealth.ca