

## Wildfire Smoke and COVID-19: Special Considerations

While the outdoors is generally safer for reducing your chances of catching COVID-19, the air outside may not be safe to breathe during a wildfire smoke event. In addition, exposure to **wildfire smoke has the potential to exacerbate COVID-19 symptoms and lead to worse health outcomes.**

When you head inside to avoid the smoke, you will want to be in a place with clean indoor air. This will both reduce the risk posed by wildfire smoke and risk from the virus.

Fortunately, the same filters that trap the fine particulate matter in wildfire smoke will help trap virus particles in aerosolized droplets. Using a high efficiency furnace filter or portable air cleaner with a true HEPA filter can help protect you from both the smoke and the virus.

### Cloth Masks and Wildfire Smoke

Cloth face coverings do not provide protection from wildfire smoke. Only respirators such as N95s can filter out the fine particles in wildfire smoke, so instead of relying on your face covering for protection, you'll need to head indoors to a place with cleaner air or leave the smoky area.



### We're in this **together!**

There is plenty we can do, and we're stronger together. Don't despair! The smoke will clear, and the skies will be blue and bright again soon.

## Air Quality Can Change Hourly: Stay Informed with Air Quality Updates



Check today's air at  
[todaysair.mt.gov](http://todaysair.mt.gov)



Call the Missoula area air quality hotline at **406-258-3600**



Know the visibility "rules of thumb"  
Cannot see 5 miles: **Unhealthy**  
Cannot see 2 miles: **Very unhealthy**  
Cannot see 1 mile: **Hazardous**



Learn More and Connect:  
[www.montanawildfiresmoke.org](http://www.montanawildfiresmoke.org)



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## Wildfire Smoke and Older Adults

When the smoke rolls into our valley it affects all of us, and climate change is bringing longer, higher intensity wildfire seasons. We all need to be prepared for wildfire smoke. The COVID-19 pandemic poses additional challenges, but there are still things we can do to stay healthy during wildfire season.

This brochure gives you the information you need to be ready for hotter, smokier summers, with information on:

- Wildfire smoke's effects on your health
- Checking local air quality updates
- Behavior changes that reduce your exposure
- Tools to create clean indoor air at home, as well as questions to ask building operators if you live in a residential facility
- Staying cool when it's hot and smoky

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## Wildfire Smoke + Your Health

Wildfire smoke contains small particulate matter called PM2.5. These microscopic particles can easily get into our lungs or even enter our bloodstream (illustration below). This is unhealthy for older adults and can trigger respiratory problems in particular.

Smoky conditions are particularly challenging for older adults. As we age, lung capacity can decrease, increasing the likelihood that air pollution will stress our respiratory and circulatory systems. Anyone with a preexisting lung or heart condition may be at risk.



When you breathe in smoke's particulate matter, you may experience coughing, trouble breathing, stinging eyes, running nose, scratchy throat, headaches, fast heartbeat, exhaustion, and grumpiness. For older adults, particulate air pollution may compromise your immune system, which increases susceptibility to infections.

## Change Behavior, Change Exposure

Even if we can't control when the smoke arrives or how long it stays, there are things we can do to reduce our exposure to wildfire smoke and its unhealthy effects, like:

- Limit time and activity level outside - consider quieter indoor activities when air is unhealthy
- Head indoors and close windows and doors closed (if not too hot!)
- Avoid burning things like candles, cigarettes, or incense, which add particulate matter to your home
- Avoid or limit vacuuming

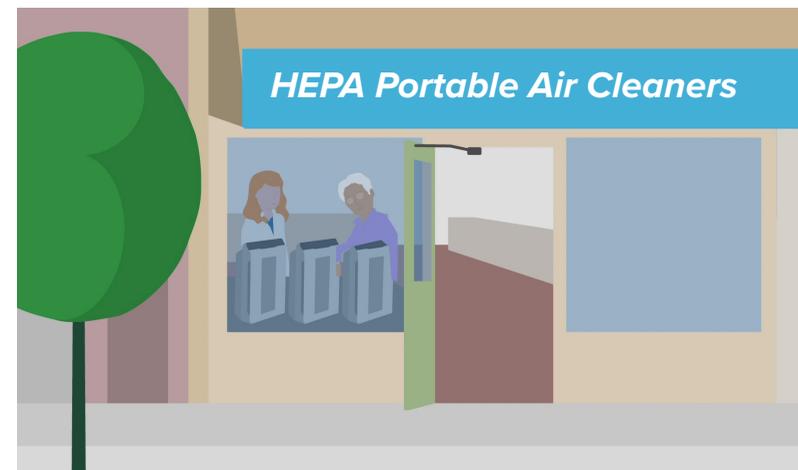
## Create Clean Indoor Air at Home

- **Purchase a HEPA Portable Air Cleaner (PAC).** HEPA PACs filter PM 2.5 from indoor air and cost ~\$150.

• **Purchase additional filters for your PAC.** If you already own a HEPA PAC, make sure you have extra filters for when your current ones get dirty.

- **Make a DIY fan/filter combination.** They are louder than a HEPA PAC, but lower cost and nearly as efficient.

• **Upgrade your HVAC filter.** If you have access to your HVAC system, upgrade to the best filter your system can handle.



Visit [montanawildfiresmoke.org/clean-indoor-air](https://montanawildfiresmoke.org/clean-indoor-air) for consumer guides, discounted PAC opportunities, and DIY fan/filter instructions.

## Living in a Long Term Care Facility? Ask your building manager these questions!

- What is the MERV rating of the building's filters? Can we use MERV 13 or better filters during wildfire season?
- How will we limit smoke coming in through doors and windows?
- If higher efficiency filters aren't available, what is the plan to reduce smoke levels inside during smoke events?
- Does the facility have enough portable air cleaners with true HEPA filters for residents' bedrooms?

## Hot *and* Smoky?

It is very important to avoid heat stress. If you have central air conditioning, you can use your air handler to keep cool and, by installing a better filter, clean the air at the same time. If you use a window air conditioner, use a PAC with a true HEPA filter or a DIY fan/filter combo in the same room with the air conditioner to remove smoke that may leak in around the sides of the air conditioner. Be sure to turn off the outdoor air intake on your air conditioner system.

If you do not have air conditioning and open your windows at night, after you close the windows in the morning, use PACs or DIY fan/filter combos to remove smoke that comes into your home with the cool air. If you cannot tolerate some smoke coming in and you do not have air conditioning, you may need to stay somewhere where you have access to air conditioning or leave the area until the smoke clears.