

Wildfire Smoke and Face Masks

Wildfire smoke can irritate your eyes, nose, throat, and lungs. It can make you cough and wheeze, and can make it hard to breathe. If you have asthma or another lung disease, or heart disease, inhaling wildfire smoke can be especially harmful.

If you cannot leave the smoky area, good ways to protect your lungs from wildfire smoke include staying indoors and reducing physical activity. Wearing a special mask called a “particulate respirator” can also help protect your lungs from wildfire smoke. These masks should be used mostly by people who have to go outdoors.

Will a face mask protect me from wildfire smoke?

Respirator masks labeled N95 or N100 provide some protection – they filter-out fine particles but not hazardous gases (such as carbon monoxide, formaldehyde, and acrolein). This type of mask can be found at many hardware and home repair stores and pharmacies. Your local health agency may also have these masks.

- Choose an N95 or N100 mask that has two straps that go around your head. Don’t choose a one-strap paper dust mask or a surgical mask that hooks around your ears – these don’t protect against the fine particles in smoke.
- Choose a size that fits over your nose and under your chin. It should seal tightly to your face. These masks don’t come in sizes that fit young children.
- Don’t use bandanas or towels (wet or dry) or tissue held over the mouth and nose. These may relieve dryness but they won’t protect your lungs from wildfire smoke.

Anyone with lung or heart disease or who is chronically ill should check with their health care provider before using any mask. Using respirator masks can make it harder to breathe, which may make existing medical conditions worse. The extra effort it takes to breathe through a respirator mask can make it uncomfortable to use them for very long. These masks should be used mostly by people who have to go outdoors.

Respirator masks shouldn't be used on young children – they don’t seal well enough to provide protection. They also don’t seal well on people with beards.

How do I use my respirator mask?

- Place the mask over your nose and under your chin, with one strap placed below the ears and one strap above. Adjust the mask so that air cannot get through at the edges.
- Pinch the metal part of the mask tightly over the top of your nose.
- The mask fits best on clean shaven skin.
- Throw away your mask when breathing through it gets difficult, if it gets damaged, or if the inside gets dirty. Use a new mask each day if you can.
- It’s harder to breathe through a mask, so take breaks often if you work outside.
- If you feel dizzy or nauseated, go to a less smoky area, take off your mask, and get medical help if you don’t feel better.



N95 respirators can help protect your lungs from wildfire smoke. Straps must go above and below the ears.



A one-strap paper mask will NOT protect your lungs from wildfire smoke.



A surgical mask will NOT protect your lungs from wildfire smoke.