

Air Pollution and Your Health

Breathing in air pollution can affect your health. Lowering your exposure to air pollution can help prevent health problems and prevent worsening symptoms of chronic conditions.

What Is Air Pollution?

Air pollution is made of gases and particles in the air that are harmful to our health.

There are two types of air pollution:

1. Outdoor air pollution
2. Indoor air pollution

Outdoor air pollution is created by big fires like wildfires; factories, vehicles, and equipment that use coal, gas, or oil (also known as fossil fuels); and chemical gases that may be toxic or can contribute to smog.

Indoor air pollution is created by things like gas stoves and cigarette smoke.

How Does Air Pollution Cause Health Problems?

Repeated exposure to air pollution over time is bad for our health. It causes inflammation in our bodies. This can lead to lung problems, heart attacks, strokes and other diseases over time.

Even short-term exposure to air pollution can cause worsening of health problems, like asthma or COPD flares.

Who Is at Higher Risk for Health Problems from Air Pollution?

Individuals at higher risk for health problems from air pollution include:

- Children
- Pregnant people
- Older adults

Individuals who already have heart disease, lung disease or other chronic conditions are also at higher risk for worsened health problems from air pollution.

What Can We Do to Protect Our Health from Air Pollution?

Make less air pollution by:

- Flying less
- Driving less, carpool more.

- Staying up to date with your car maintenance services
- Turning off the engine when waiting in the car or when the car is parked. Don't idle or leave the engine on
- Choosing an electric, hybrid, or fuel-efficient car that uses less gas
- Using an induction or electric kitchen stove instead of a gas stove

Minimize exposure to air pollution:

- Walking or biking on quieter roads with fewer vehicles
- Cooking in a well-ventilated kitchen by opening the windows or turning on the kitchen exhaust fan
- Using an air purifier. Be sure to clean or replace the filters regularly as recommended in the user manual
- [Checking your local Air Quality Index \(AQI\)](#) to learn if your outdoor air is clean or polluted
- Avoiding going outside when the Air Quality Index is bad. If you need to go outside, wear a high-quality face mask, like the N95 which can help filter dust and other small particles (but not toxic gas pollution)

AQI Basics for Pollution: Categories Based on AQI and Level of Health Concern

The AQI Basics for Pollution table below divides the AQI into categories based on level of health concern.

Air Quality Index	Who Needs to be Concerned?	What Should I Do?
Good 0-50	It's a great day to be active outside.	
Moderate 51-100	Some people who may be unusually sensitive to particle pollution.	<p>Unusually sensitive people: Consider reducing prolonged or heavy exertion. Watch for symptoms such as coughing or shortness of breath. These are signs to take it easier.</p> <p>Everyone else: It's a good day to be active outside.</p>
Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups 101-150	Sensitive groups include people with heart or lung disease, older adults, children and teenagers.	<p>Sensitive groups: Reduce prolonged or heavy exertion. It's OK to be active outside, but take more breaks and do less intense activities. Watch for symptoms such as coughing or shortness of breath.</p> <p>People with asthma should follow their asthma action plans and keep quick relief medicine handy.</p> <p>If you have heart disease: Symptoms such as palpitations, shortness of breath, or unusual fatigue may indicate a serious problem. If you have any of these, contact your health care provider.</p>
Unhealthy 151 to 200	Everyone	<p>Sensitive groups: Avoid prolonged or heavy exertion. Move activities indoors or reschedule to a time when the air quality is better.</p> <p>Everyone else: Reduce prolonged or heavy exertion. Take more breaks during all outdoor activities.</p>
Very Unhealthy 201-300	Everyone	<p>Sensitive groups: Avoid all physical activity outdoors. Move activities indoors or reschedule to a time when air quality is better.</p> <p>Everyone else: Avoid prolonged or heavy exertion. Consider moving activities indoors or rescheduling to a time when air quality is better.</p>
Hazardous 301-500	Everyone	<p>Everyone: Avoid all physical activity outdoors.</p> <p>Sensitive groups: Remain indoors and keep activity levels low. Follow tips for keeping particle levels low indoors.</p>

[Last reviewed: 08/03/22]