

BUSHFIRE SMOKE HEALTH ALERT

Information for NSW General Practitioners
Please distribute this information to all staff



Health

1. Bushfire smoke contains fine particles that may cause health effects
2. People at greater risk from smoke include those with underlying lung or heart conditions, the elderly and young children
3. People at greater risk should avoid outdoor physical activity when it is smoky and stay indoors as much as possible with windows and doors closed
4. Encourage patients with lung and heart conditions to adhere to their treatment plans and seek medical attention if symptoms persist or worsen

Background

NSW is experiencing an extended period of bushfire activity. Bushfire smoke consists of particulate matter and gases and is known to cause health effects. Fine particulate matter in bushfire smoke penetrates deep into the lung, cause an inflammatory response, and exacerbate existing chronic health conditions. The higher the exposure to air pollution the greater the health risk.

Health effects associated with exposure to smoke

Exposure to smoke will generally result in mild symptoms like sore eyes, nose and throat, and cough. However, it may exacerbate chronic lung and heart conditions, causing severe illness.

Higher risk groups

While anyone can be affected by smoke, the following groups may be at greater risk:

- People with lung or heart conditions (due to their underlying disease)
- The elderly (due to reduced physiological reserve)
- Young children (due to lung size and propensity for outdoor activity)

Recommendations

Encourage patients with pre-existing lung and heart conditions to adhere to their treatment plan and to seek medical attention if they experience difficulty in controlling their symptoms. Remind them that in case of an emergency, dial Triple Zero (000).

Encourage patients (especially those at higher risk) to reduce their exposure by:

- Avoiding outdoor physical activity when they can see or smell smoke.
- Staying indoors with windows and doors closed when it is smoky. Sealing doors and windows with sheets or towels and setting air-conditioners to recirculate can be beneficial.
- Spending time in air conditioned public places like libraries and shopping centres.
- Taking advantage of smoke-free periods to air out houses.
- Avoiding using indoor sources of air pollution like candles and incense sticks

Up to date air quality information is available at: www.environment.nsw.gov.au/aqms/aqi.htm

Face masks

A well fitted P2 face mask may reduce exposure to fine particles. However, evidence suggests that these masks may not be effective in practice because it is difficult to achieve a good fit and maintain a seal around the face. Surgical masks are not effective against smoke.

Further information

- Contact your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055
- NSW Health bushfire smoke fact sheet:
www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/factsheets/Pages/bushfire-smoke.aspx

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Richard Broome'.

Dr Richard Broome
Director, Environmental Health Branch, NSW Health

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