

# Protect your health in wildfire season

By Clark Snyder

There's been a colorful flag flying at RiverStone Health near the corner of First Avenue South and South 27<sup>th</sup> Street for months now. Until recently, that flag was green, indicating that Billings air quality is good. But we know that during wildfire season, there is risk that air quality will deteriorate, and the flag has been yellow for much of the past couple of weeks. When there's wildfire smoke in our air, yellow, orange, red, purple or maroon flags will go up to indicate the current air quality rating from good to hazardous.

Another way to check air quality is online at [todaysair.mtdeq.us](https://todaysair.mtdeq.us). The Montana Department of Environmental Quality updates that site daily with air quality information for communities across Montana.

The [todaysair.mtdeq.us](https://todaysair.mtdeq.us) website provides guidance in an easy-to-read chart on how the air quality may affect the general population and people who are more sensitive to air pollution. It's a good idea to check that website and local media reports.

Avoid smoke exposure during outdoor recreation. Before you travel to a park or forest or outdoor event, check air quality reports for the areas you are traveling to and confirm the event has not been cancelled.

Breathing in smoke can cause coughing, trouble breathing, stinging eyes, scratchy throat, runny nose, irritated sinuses, wheezing and shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, an asthma attack, tiredness, and fast heartbeat. Older adults, pregnant women, children, and people with preexisting respiratory and heart conditions may be more likely to get sick if they breathe in wildfire smoke.

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services recommends limiting exposure to wildfire smoke as much as possible. Here are tips for breathing easier:

- If you are advised to stay indoors because of poor air quality, stay in and keep your indoor air as clean as possible. Keep windows and doors closed unless it is very hot outside. Run an air conditioner if you have one, but keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside.
- Seek shelter elsewhere if you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed.
- Do not add to indoor pollution. When smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles and fireplaces. Do not vacuum, because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home. Do not smoke tobacco or other products, because smoking puts even more pollution into the air.

- Keep windows closed while driving in a vehicle.
- Use a mechanical air cleaner to help purify air in your home.
- Drink lots of water to help keep your airways moist.
- Do not rely on dust masks for protection. Surgical masks or dust masks commonly found at hardware stores trap large particles, but will not protect your lungs from smoke. An “N95” mask, properly worn, will offer some protection. If you decide to keep a mask on hand, see the Respirator Fact Sheet provided by CDC’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. A wet towel or bandana is not recommended because it would not stop fine particles from getting into the lungs.

### **Asthma precautions**

Heed your doctor's advice about medicines and about your respiratory management plan if you have asthma or another lung disease. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

Be careful about using masks. Filtering face-piece respirators and masks can make the work of breathing more difficult and can lead to increased breathing rates and heart rates, according to the state health department. They can also contribute to heat stress. People who have heart or respiratory diseases should only use a respiratory under a doctor’s supervision.

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