

## EPA changes to the Air Quality Index (AQI): What does this mean for your area?

The EPA is changing several AQI breakpoints in the beginning of May 2024 that impact DOH health guidance for fine particle pollution (PM<sub>2.5</sub>). This guidance is most often used for wildfire smoke events, but also applies more generally to PM<sub>2.5</sub> from all sources.

- The breakpoint between Good (green) and Moderate (yellow) was lowered. We expect more hours and days in the Moderate (yellow) category.
- The breakpoints between Unhealthy (red) and Very Unhealthy (purple), and between Very Unhealthy (purple) and Hazardous (maroon) were lowered. We expect more hours and days to be Very Unhealthy and Hazardous because of wildfire smoke.

AQI for Fine Particle Pollution (Breakpoints are in micrograms per cubic meter)		
AQI Category and Index Value	Previous AQI Category Breakpoints	Updated AQI Category Breakpoints
<b>Good</b> (0-50)	0.0 to 12.0	0.0 to 9.0
<b>Moderate</b> (51-100)	12.1 to 35.4	9.1 to 35.4
<b>Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups</b> (101-150)	35.5 to 55.4	35.5 to 55.4
<b>Unhealthy</b> (151-200)	55.5 to 150.4	55.5 to 125.4
<b>Very Unhealthy</b> (201-300)	150.5 to 250.4	125.5 to 225.4
<b>Hazardous</b> (301+)	250.5 to 500	225.5+

### Key Changes to DOH guidance:

- The recommendation to **cancel outdoor events or activities** remains when the AQI value is  $\geq 201$ . This has shifted from a PM<sub>2.5</sub> concentration of  $\geq 150.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  to  $\geq 125.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , in accordance with the EPA change in the AQI breakpoints.
- The recommendation to discuss **school closures** with administrators, based on **indoor PM<sub>2.5</sub>**, will remain when the AQI value is  $\geq 201$ . This has shifted from a PM<sub>2.5</sub> concentration of  $\geq 150.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  to  $\geq 125.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , in accordance with the EPA change in the AQI breakpoints.

### What do these changes mean for schools and youth events and activities?

- When the AQI is Moderate, the DOH recommendation for outdoor events and activities is to allow children and youth with health conditions to opt out or move to a safer area. With the EPA change in the AQI breakpoints, more hours and days will shift from the Good to Moderate category. Recommendations for children and youth without health conditions are not impacted by these changes.
- The DOH recommendation for schools to discuss school closures with administrators will be updated to the new breakpoint corresponding to **indoor PM<sub>2.5</sub>**. This breakpoint

is still at an indoor equivalent AQI value of  $\geq 201$ , which now corresponds to a PM<sub>2.5</sub> concentration of  $\geq 125.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ .

- See Wildfire Smoke Guidance for Canceling Events or Activities and Closing Schools section “Indoor PM<sub>2.5</sub> Measurement in Schools” for more information about using indoor sensors to assess indoor air quality for decisions that need to be made in advance, such as a school closure.
- For information on using indoor sensors to inform decision-making about activities happening in the near-term, such as the intensity level of an indoor activity or deciding when to open and close windows, see Appendix B in the [Washington Children and Youth Activities Guide for Air Quality](#).

## What do these changes mean for outdoor public events?

- DOH recommends cancelling outdoor public events when the AQI value is  $\geq 201$ , as before, which now corresponds to a PM<sub>2.5</sub> concentration of  $\geq 125.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ .

## Why is this guidance changing?

- The EPA breakpoints were lowered after a long process of reviewing the newest scientific evidence on the impact of PM<sub>2.5</sub> on health.
- PM<sub>2.5</sub> is a very harmful pollutant that can lead to adverse health outcomes including asthma exacerbations, heart attacks and premature deaths. More than half the population of Washington is at increased risk of poor health outcomes from breathing in PM<sub>2.5</sub>.
- The lowered breakpoints are being put into place to protect the health of our communities.
- To learn more, visit [EPA’s fact sheet on the AQI changes](#).

## Where do I go for more information?

- To provide feedback or request additional information, email [airquality@doh.wa.gov](mailto:airquality@doh.wa.gov).
- To find information on current air quality conditions and the AQI, visit the [Department of Ecology’s air monitoring map](#) or [EPA’s Fire and Smoke map](#).



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