Wildfire Smoke Guidance Summary:
School Closures in Washington

This is a summary of the Washington State Departments of Health and Ecology guidance for canceling or moving outdoor children's activities and closing schools when smoke may be a health threat. **For more information:** Wildfire Smoke Guidance for Canceling Outdoor Events or Activities and Closing Schools. While this document is written for wildfire smoke, it can be informative for other sources of $PM_{2.5}$.

Health effects from smoke

Symptoms of wildfire smoke exposure range from minor irritation, such as burning eyes, runny nose and coughing, to life threatening.

People with increased health risks from wildfire smoke include people with heart and lung diseases, people with respiratory infections, people with diabetes, people 18 and younger or older than 65, pregnant people, people who smoke, people of color, Tribal and Indigenous people, people with access and functional needs, outdoor workers, people who are unhoused, and people with low income. Children and youth with pre-existing diseases, such as asthma and diabetes, are especially at-risk from smoke exposure.

Factors to consider for school closures

- What is the forecast for how long wildfire smoke levels will remain high?
- Have all options to improve indoor air quality been attempted?
- Are students and staff who are sensitive to smoke allowed to stay home if it is safer?
- Is it safe to walk or bike to school?
- Where will children be relocated if schools are closed Is air quality better there?

(More in full guidance report)

Measuring wildfire smoke levels

The concentration of $PM_{2.5}$ – particles less than 2.5 micrometers in diameter – is the most useful measurement of smoke levels to protect health. $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations are reported across six health hazard levels in the Air Quality Index (AQI).

Current outdoor $PM_{2.5}$ levels from agency monitors are available as AQI values that are updated hourly on the WA Smoke Blog, EPA's AirNow App, and Ecology's Air Quality Map. Forecasts are often available during wildfire season on the WA Smoke Blog and Ecology's Air Quality Map. Low-cost sensors can measure $PM_{2.5}$ outside when there is not a nearby agency monitor, though these are less accurate than agency monitors and uncorrected sensor data should not be directly compared to $PM_{2.5}$ action levels. Publicly reporting $PM_{2.5}$ outdoor sensor measurements with an applied smoke correction factor are available on the WA Smoke Blog. (More in full guidance report)

When outdoor forecasted 24-hour or NowCast $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations:

- Equal or exceed AQI value 101 ("Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" category or worse), modify duration or limit intensity of children and youth outdoor activities, move them to an area with safer air quality, or consider canceling depending on the length of the activity.
- Equal or exceed AQI value 151 ("Unhealthy" category or worse), cancel children and youth outdoor activities or move them to an area with safer air quality.

When school is in session and indoor $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations:

- Equal or exceed 125.5 µg/m3 (indoor equivalent to AQI value 201, "Very Unhealthy" category or worse), discuss school closure with administrators.

For more information about the health impacts of wildfire smoke, visit

DOH.WA.GOV/SMOKEFROMFIRES

DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY
State of Washington

Washington State Department of HEALTH

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Air Quality Index: PM2.5	Recommended Public Health Actions Check current and forecasted air quality at wasmoke.blogspot.com

Good
(0-50)
	Prior to wildfire season:
	• Coordinate a local plan for public health actions and distribute preparedness information to the public.
	• Identify indoor spaces where individuals will seek cleaner air during wildfire smoke events and develop plans to protect indoor air quality, including filtration.
	  • Indoor spaces used by sensitive groups, such as schools, child care facilities, and long-term care facilities.
	  • Community cleaner air settings, such as libraries.
	  • Temporary cleaner air shelters.
	During wildfire season (late spring, summer, early fall):
	• Monitor wildfires, smoke forecasts, and air quality at WA Smoke Blog.
	• If forecasts predict smoke in your area, review the Washington Wildfire Response document for Severe Smoke Episodes and the Wildfire Smoke Guide for Public Health Officials.

Moderate
(51-100)
	Above recommendations, plus:
	• Distribute health information to the public, including steps to take with health advisory categories: Washington Air Quality Guide for Particle Pollution.
	  • Refer to the WA Smoke Blog for information about wildfires, smoke forecasts, and air quality.
	  • Identify and focus outreach efforts for sensitive groups.
	• Coordinate with public health partners to follow recommended public health actions.
	• Recommend following the Washington Children and Youth Activities Guide for Air Quality.
	• For outdoor workers, start following WA Department of Labor and Industries' requirements.

Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups (101-150)	**Above recommendations, plus:** • Recommend sensitive groups take steps to reduce exposure (limit time outside, avoid high intensity outdoor activity, and follow tips for cleaner indoor air). • Recommend sensitive groups spend time in a cleaner air setting in the community, such as a library, if they cannot maintain cleaner air at home. • Cancel children's outdoor athletic events and practices or move them to an area with safe air quality, either indoors or at a different outside location: Washington Children and Youth Activities Guide for Air Quality. • For an extended duration of smoke, consider opening a cleaner air shelter for sensitive groups.

Air Quality Index: PM2.5	Recommended Public Health Actions Check current and forecasted air quality at wasmoke.blogspot.com
Unhealthy (151-200)	**Above recommendations, plus:** • Recommend everyone take steps to reduce exposure (limit time outside, avoid strenuous outdoor activity, and follow tips for cleaner indoor air). • Recommend everyone spend time in an identified cleaner air setting in the community, such as a library, if they cannot maintain cleaner air in their residence. • Consider canceling outdoor public events and activities: Wildfire Smoke Guidance for Canceling Outdoor Events or Activities and Closing Schools. • For an extended duration of smoke, consider opening a cleaner air shelter for the public.
Very Unhealthy (201-300)	**Above recommendations, plus:** • Strongly recommend everyone take steps to reduce exposure (stay inside and filter indoor air to keep it cleaner; go elsewhere for cleaner air if needed and possible). • Cancel outdoor public events and activities: Wildfire Smoke Guidance for Canceling Outdoor Events or Activities and Closing Schools. • If school is in session, discuss school closure with administrators if indoor air cannot be kept lower than $PM_{2.5}$ 125.5 µg/m³ (AQI value of 201): Wildfire Smoke Guidance for Canceling Outdoor Events or Activities and Closing Schools. • Distribute NIOSH-approved particulate respirators, such as N95 masks, as available, for limited use outside. Include training material for proper fit and use. • For an extended duration of smoke, consider recommending that sensitive groups voluntarily relocate to an unimpacted area.
Hazardous (>300)	**Above recommendations, plus:** • For an extended duration of smoke, consider recommending that everyone voluntarily relocate to an unimpacted area.

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