Wildfire Smoke and Face Masks for the General Public

Wildfire smoke can irritate your eyes, nose, throat, and lungs. It can make you cough and wheeze and can make it hard to breathe. Inhaling wildfire smoke can be especially harmful for people with lung or heart disease, respiratory infections, or other chronic conditions; people 18 and younger and 65 and older; pregnant people; outdoor workers; and many others.

The most effective ways to protect yourself from wildfire smoke are to stay indoors with cleaner indoor air, limit time outdoors, and reduce physical activity. People who must be outside in smoky air may benefit from wearing masks. However, using masks can make it harder to breathe because of the resistance when breathing through them. Anyone with lung or heart disease should check with their health care provider before using a mask.

This guidance applies to the use of face masks for the general public in non-occupational settings. If you are exposed to wildfire smoke at work, your employer is required to provide protections. See the Department of Labor and Industries' wildfire smoke rule for additional details.

Will a Face Mask Protect me from Wildfire Smoke?

Masks worn correctly may provide some protection by filtering out fine particles in the smoke. Particle-filtering masks do not help with hazardous gases in smoke. If a mask does not fit properly, it will provide little or no protection.

Types of Disposable Particle-filtering Masks

NIOSH approved N95 respirators provide a high level of protection and are recommended if you must be outside for any extended period during wildfire smoke. N95 respirators must seal on your face to work. They should have two straps that go around your head. See How to Use your N95 Respirator for more information on fit and how to achieve a proper seal. See Respirators and Mask Types and Performance for non-disposable respirators with a higher level of protection, including from gases.

Best: NIOSH N95

KN95 masks and other international masks (sometimes referred to as international respirators) provide a lower level of protection than N95 respirators but are a reasonable alternative if you do not have access to an N95 respirator. KN95 masks will provide minimal protection if they do not have a good seal on your face.

Good: KN95

Other types of masks may provide minimal protection, depending on how they fit on your face and the mask material. See Respirators and Mask Types and Performance on different types of respirators and masks and the protection they provide.

Poor: Other masks

Remember: Masks are designed to protect you from exposures from different things. For example, a surgical mask that is designed to keep doctors from exposing patients does not have the fit or material to offer protection from wildfire smoke.

How do I use an N95 Respirator?

- Place the respirator over your nose and under your chin, with one strap placed below the ears and one strap above, at the crown of your head.
- If glasses are worn, they should be placed over the straps of the respirator. Positioning them under the straps can make the respirator fit less effectively.
- Adjust the respirator so that air cannot get through at the edges. Any leakage around the edges of the respirator allows unfiltered air to enter.
- Mold the metal part tightly over your nose.
- Follow instructions on the package to check for a tight face seal. See How to Use Your N95 Respirator for more information.
- Respirators fit best on clean-shaven skin. Respirators do not work for people with beards because they will not seal.
- Different brands and models of respirators may fit differently. Trying different respirators and getting a fit test can ensure you have a respirator that works well.

Safety and Health Considerations

- N95s and KN95s with a relief or exhalation valve can make breathing easier. Masks with valves are not effective in protecting people around you from respiratory illness but are useful for protection from wildfire smoke.
- Children 7 and older may be able to use an adult small sized N95 respirator depending on the size of their face. See Masks to Protect from Wildfire Smoke During Pregnancy or Early Child Years from Western States PEHSU for more guidance for children.
- If you have a lung or heart condition or other medical condition, talk to your doctor before using a mask.
- Throw away your mask when breathing through it gets difficult, if it is damaged, or if the inside gets dirty.
- It is harder to breathe through a mask, so take breaks often if you work outside. If you feel dizzy or sick, go to a less smoky area, take off your mask, and get medical help if you do not feel better.
- If it is very hot outside, wearing an N95 may increase the risk of heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Monitor yourself for symptoms, and move to an indoor space with cooler and cleaner air as able.
- N95 masks can still be suitable for wildfire smoke for years beyond the recommended date posted on the package if there is no visible damage and the strap still functions. If it is damaged, does not provide a good seal, or the strap breaks, do not use.

For more information about masks: Community Respirators and Masks (NIOSH)

For more general information: Smoke from Fires (WA DOH)

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