

Protecting Children from Smoke and Particulate Matter



When air conditions are especially smoky, children are at risk for health effects from exposure to smoke and particulate matter, mostly because their lungs are still growing. Particulate matter is the solid particles and liquid droplets found in the air such as ash, dust and smoke.

Children who breathe in smoke and particulate matter can have chest pain and tightness; trouble breathing; wheezing; coughing; nose, throat, and eye burning; dizziness; or other symptoms. Children with asthma, allergies, or chronic health conditions may have more trouble breathing when smoke or high amounts of particulate matter are present.

Consult with your health care provider for medical advice as needed. Also, keep in mind that infants and small children may not be able to communicate symptoms fully. Seek medical care if your child has any problem breathing, is very sleepy, refuses food and water, or shows other major health concerns.

Reducing Smoke Exposure

Smoke and particulate matter levels will vary day to day depending on a variety of factors, including weather and fire conditions. Parents and caregivers should consider these suggestions when conditions are smoky:

- Limit outdoor activity, especially exercise or other strenuous activities.
- Run the central heat and air system in your home with the fresh-air intake closed to keep outdoor smoke from getting indoors.
- Use a portable air cleaner. The EPA has a detailed guide on how to select an appropriate air cleaner. <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/air-cleaners-and-air-filters-home-printable>
- Do not use humidifiers to clean the air. They do not eliminate smoke or particulate matter.
- Do not use air freshening sprays or burning candles to decrease the smell of smoke. They do not eliminate smoke and may increase the particulate matter in your home.

Use of Masks or Other Air Shields

- Face masks for paint, dust and even surgical masks, or N95 masks are not made to fit children and will not protect children from breathing smoke.
- Masks are not recommended for children, and may increase respiratory distress.
- Breathing through a wet washcloth does not prevent breathing in smoke or particulate matter.