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Smoke and your health – Hazelwood open cut mine fire

Community information

March 2014

This information has been developed by the Department of Health in response to community questions and concerns about smoke from the Hazelwood open cut mine fire.

Smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas and may affect people's health. This fact sheet provides information on smoke, how it can affect you and your family's health, and actions that you can take to avoid or reduce potential health effects.

Smoke from fire in the Hazelwood open cut mine is impacting towns in the area. Although the fire is controlled, it is likely that smoke and poor visibility will be present for some time. The wind and weather determine which areas will be affected.

What is smoke?

Smoke from fires is a mixture of different-sized particles, water vapour and gases, including carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides. The larger particles which are visible to the eye contribute to the visible haze when a fire is burning. They are generally too large to be breathed deeply into the lungs but can irritate the nose and throat. Finer microscopic particles and gases are small enough to be breathed deep into the lungs and can cause health effects.

How can smoke affect my health?

How smoke affects you depends on your age, pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma or heart disease, and the length of time you are exposed to the smoke.

Signs of smoke irritation include itchy eyes, sore throat, runny nose and coughing. Healthy adults usually find that after a short exposure to smoke these symptoms clear up once they are away from the smoke.

Children, the elderly, pregnant women, smokers and people with pre-existing illnesses such as heart or lung conditions (including asthma) are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in fine particles. Symptoms may worsen and include wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing.

It is very important that people with pre-existing health conditions take their medication, follow their treatment plan, and seek immediate medical advice if symptoms occur.

Protecting your health

- During extended, very smoky conditions, sensitive individuals should consider temporarily staying with a friend or relative living outside the smoke-affected area. Others should also consider a break away from the smoky conditions.
- Avoid physical activity outdoors (exercise allows more fine particles to be breathed deeper into the lungs). People with pre-existing lung or heart conditions in particular, should rest as much as possible and keep away from the smoke.
- Anyone with a heart or lung condition should follow the treatment plan advised by their doctor and keep at least five day's supply of medication on hand.
- People with asthma should follow their personal asthma plan.
- When at home, stay indoors with all windows and doors closed.

- If you operate an air conditioner during smoky conditions, switch it to 'recycle' or 'recirculate' to reduce smoke coming inside your home.
- When indoors, minimise other sources of air pollution, such as cigarette smoke, burning candles, using woodstoves or stirring up fine dust from sweeping or vacuuming.
- If your home gets too hot to be comfortable, or is smoky, try to take an air-conditioned break at a local community library or shopping centre.
- If there is a break in smoky conditions, take the opportunity to air out your home to improve indoor air quality.

What about wearing a facemask?

Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine particles from smoke and are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.

Special face masks (called 'P2' masks) filter smoke providing greater protection against inhaling fine particles. They are available at most hardware stores.

However, before deciding to wear a mask you should understand that they can be hot and uncomfortable to wear and they can make it harder for you to breathe normally. Anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition should seek medical advice before using them.

If the seal around the face and mouth is poor the mask is much less effective (men should be clean shaven to get a good seal). The masks do not filter out gases. It is better to stay indoors, away from the smoke, unless you cannot avoid working outdoors.

For further information

Your safety

If you see smoke haze, check for fire warnings in your area:

- Listen to your local radio station for updates
- For information and support, visit the Community Information and Recovery Centre, 22 Hazelwood Street, Morwell, 9am - 6pm.

Smoke and health

- If you or anyone in your care is experiencing symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure, seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.
- Anyone experiencing difficulty breathing or chest pain should seek urgent medical assistance – phone 000.
- For further information about asthma go to the Asthma Foundation of Victoria's website at www.asthma.org.au or call 1800 278 462

Air quality and smoke

For information on air quality and smoke impacts from fires visit the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) Victoria website at: <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/yourenvironment/air/air-pollution> or call EPA on 1300 372 842.

Department of Health

More information on the health effects of smoke or on the hazards after fire contact 1300 761 874 (during business hours) or go to: www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/bushfires.htm

Latrobe City Council can be contacted on 1300 367 700 or go to: <http://www.latrobe.vic.gov.au/Home>

Vic Emergency provides information on summer fires across Victoria: www.emergency.vic.gov.au

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