

# Safety Matters

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## Wildfire Smoke Safety

Wildfires can have devastating impacts on affected communities. Even after the flames subside, these fires can leave behind lasting safety risks. Specifically, the smoke generated by wildfires can linger in the air for weeks or months, making nearby individuals susceptible to inhaling a range of toxic compounds, such as carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, benzene, acrolein, aldehydes and particulate matter. This can lead to respiratory tract irritation and may worsen symptoms among individuals with preexisting heart or lung conditions. In severe cases, the inhalation of wildfire smoke can result in cancer, stroke or death.

What's worse, this smoke can travel hundreds—sometimes even thousands—of miles from the original location of a wildfire, affecting individuals far away from the initial flames. Smoke is especially dangerous for individuals who spend most of their time working outdoors; however, it can also move through the air vents of buildings and impact indoor employees. While OSHA standards require employers to implement procedures to protect workers from wildfire smoke exposure, it's also critical for employees like you to take steps to minimize related safety risks. This article outlines precautions to consider for outdoor and indoor environments.

### Outdoor Precautions

It's best to avoid spending time outdoors when wildfire smoke is negatively impacting air quality. The Environmental Protection Agency has a [resource](#) that can help you monitor air quality conditions in your community.

Nevertheless, if you are required to work outdoors in the presence of wildfire smoke, take these precautions:

- Follow all workplace policies and procedures regarding smoke safety. This may include wearing required personal protective equipment (i.e., a respirator), using the buddy system and providing regular updates to your supervisor throughout your shift.
- Relocate or reschedule your work tasks to areas or times of day that carry the lowest possible smoke exposure (if possible). In particular, try to avoid working outdoors in valley areas and during the evening and early morning hours.
- Refrain from engaging in overly strenuous or heavy-duty tasks, as excessive physical activity can place unnecessary added pressure on your heart and lungs.
- Take frequent breaks in fresh air. Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water during these breaks.
- Know the signs of smoke-related illnesses. These signs include burning or watery eyes; loss of vision; runny nose or sinus pressure; headache; sore throat; cough; wheezing or shortness of breath; chest pain; dizziness or lightheadedness; and sudden numbness,



weakness or confusion. Notify your supervisor if you or a co-worker starts to experience these signs, and seek medical attention immediately.

### Indoor Precautions

Most wildfire smoke precautions for outdoor environments also apply to indoor environments. Here are some extra precautions to keep in mind:

- Keep windows, doors and other building openings closed as much as possible to reduce the spread of smoke.
- Clean your workstation regularly by dusting and disinfecting commonly touched items and surfaces. This can help limit indoor air pollutants. Consider placing an air purifier at your desk to limit pollutants further.
- Avoid engaging in tasks that could worsen indoor air quality, such as smoking, burning candles or using harsh chemicals without proper ventilation.
- Ensure your workplace has a well-functioning heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) system with an adequate air filter. Consult your supervisor if you notice problems with the HVAC system.

### Conclusion

Wildfire smoke poses significant safety threats for individuals both near and far from the starting point of the flames. By understanding smoke-related risks and taking steps to protect yourself on the job, you can foster a safe work environment and remain happy and healthy.

Reach out to your supervisor for additional guidance on wildfire smoke safety.