



**Lewis County Public Health & Social Services**

# **Health Beat**

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Contact: Ed Mund – 360-740-1227  
ed.mund@lewiscountywa.gov

## **Protect Yourself from Wildfire Smoke**

*by Rachel Wood, M.D., MPH, Lewis County Health Officer*

From all the predictions we've seen, we are expecting a bad wildfire season this summer, even here on the usually damp, green west side of the mountains. As the fire season progresses, the media will be a rich source of valuable information on staying healthy outdoors.

Air quality agencies sample the atmosphere and evaluate the risk to people who are outside in the bad air. You will see times when people with breathing problems are cautioned to stay indoors. When it's really bad, everyone is cautioned to stay indoors.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), just staying inside with the doors and windows closed can reduce exposure to ambient air pollution by as much as a third or more. But what about the other two-thirds risk of exposure? Fortunately, there are steps you can take to protect your health and improve air quality inside your home even more.

### **Reduce particles in indoor air.**

- Vacuum cleaners can stir up particles into the air such as dust, dirt, pollens, and pet dander. Do not vacuum during a wildfire smoke event unless your vacuum is equipped with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter.

- Eliminate particle emission activities. Do not burn candles, smoke tobacco products, or use aerosol products indoors. Gas- or wood-burning stoves or fireplaces should not be used. Odds are you won't be burning in warm weather anyway, but it's important to note just the same.

### **Create a Clean Air Room in Your House**

Designate one room in your home as a clean air room. An interior room with few windows and doors – like a bedroom – is the best. Setting up and maintaining a clean air room include:

- Pre-clean the room. Vacuum and deep clean all the surfaces that collect dust.
- During the event, keep the doors and windows closed. Only open doors to enter and exit the room. Never open windows.
- Run your air conditioner or central air system if you have one. If the system has a “fresh air” option, turn it off so it does not draw polluted air in from the outside. Set the system to run continuously – usually done by switching from “Auto” mode to “On”.
- If you don't have air conditioning or central air system, use a single-room air cleaner. Make sure it is sized properly for the room it is in. Get a cleaner with maximum filter efficiency, preferably HEPA.
- The Puget Sound Clean Air Authority has instructions on building a do-it-yourself air filter using a box fan and standard furnace filters. A tutorial with video and photos is at: <https://www.pscleanair.org/525/DIY-Air-Filter>.

If it is too warm to stay indoors with the windows closed, or you do not have the ability to create a clean air room in your home, consider seeking shelter elsewhere for the duration of the bad air event.

A key component of emergency preparedness is pre-planning for an alternate shelter in case you cannot stay in your home. Escaping air that is hazardous to your health qualifies as an emergency and can be prepared for. Alternate sheltering may be as simple as pre-arranging lodging with family or friends.

It's good to pre-plan emergency housing both close by and outside the local area. In any emergency, the area affected can range from a few blocks to the whole county. Wildfire smoke certainly can cover large areas. You may need to travel some distance to be safe.

### **Educate Yourself**

For more information on wildfire smoke risks and improving indoor air quality, see:  
Washington State Department of Health Fact Sheet at:

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/Pubs/333-208.pdf>

EPA guide to air cleaners in the home at:

<https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/air-cleaners-and-air-filters-home>

EPA Smoke-Ready Toolbox for Wildfires

<https://www.epa.gov/smoke-ready-toolbox-wildfires>

Smoke from wildfires can adversely affect air quality and puts everyone at risk from smoke exposure. Educate yourself about the risks of smoke exposure and actions you can take to protect your health and your family's.

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