

## Wildfires and Your Health

Every year in British Columbia there are hundreds or thousands of wildfires (also called forest fires). Wildfires can affect your health and safety in many ways: the smoke from wildfires can affect the quality of the air, a power outage may spoil your food or you may have to evacuate if a wildfire is close to your home. Preparing in advance for [wildfires](#) can help you keep your family safe.

The [Government of British Columbia: Wildfire Service](#) posts information on [current wildfire activity](#). You can find information on fires that pose a significant safety risk, air quality, fire danger ratings and more.

Wildfire smoke is composed of many different air pollutants. For more information see [Government of British Columbia: Wildfire Service](#).

## Emergency Preparedness

There are many things you can do to prepare [before](#) an emergency or disaster. [During](#) a wildfire, you will want to watch for symptoms and know where to find the latest information on wildfires in your area, including community evacuation orders. [After](#) a wildfire, you may experience issues such as poor air quality or contaminated water. For more information on emergency preparedness, visit: [Canadian Red Cross: Be Ready-Emergency Preparedness and Recovery](#).

## Before a Wildfire

During wildfire season roads may be closed, you may be cut off from certain supplies and services or your community may be evacuated. See the resources below about how to prepare for an emergency and stay safe in case there is an evacuation alert or order.

- [BC Government: Build an Emergency Kit and Grab-and-Go Bag](#)
- [Canadian Red Cross: Wildfires - Before, During & After](#)
- [Government of Canada: Get Prepared](#)
- [Preparing for an Emergency: A Focus on Water and Food](#)

For emergency planning if you have specific health conditions, see:

- [BC Children's Hospital: Diabetes Emergency Survival Pack](#)
- [BC Renal Agency: Emergency Preparedness](#)

For information about protecting your community from wildfire, visit:

- [FireSmartBC](#)
- [FireSmartCanada](#)

## During a Wildfire

Wildfire smoke may or may not affect you. Each person's response to the smoke depends on their age, health and exposure. [Common symptoms](#) include eye irritation, runny nose, sore throat, mild cough, phlegm production, wheezing or headaches. These symptoms may be managed without seeking medical attention.

If symptoms do not improve after taking action to reduce exposure or if they worsen, seek prompt medical attention.

Find information about wildfires in B.C., including where they are and what to do if you are evacuated, below:

- [Government of British Columbia: What are Emergency Support Services?](#)
- [Government of British Columbia: Wildfire Dashboard](#)

Some health authorities in B.C. provide local information on wildfires:

- [First Nations Health Authority: Wildfire Response](#)
- [Interior Health: Wildfires](#)
- [Island Health: Wildfires](#)

## Evacuation Information

If you are under an evacuation order or affected by fire, please contact your local government to receive emergency support services. To find the Emergency Program Coordinator for your community visit the [Civic Info BC Directory](#).

If there is a wildfire in or near your community, you may be evacuated to a safer area. Wildfires can impact evacuation routes. Visit [DriveBC](#) for the latest updates on driving conditions in your community.

Seniors may need special support in the event of an evacuation. See the resources below on getting prepared:

- [Caring for Seniors in Residential Care in an Emergency](#) (HealthLinkBC File #103c)
- [Community Evacuation Information for Seniors](#) (HealthLinkBC File #103a)

### Health Care for Evacuees

Smoke particles can irritate the airway. If you have a history of asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD), other respiratory conditions or heart problems, you should monitor your symptoms. Sometimes smoky air can increase the risk of certain infections, such as COVID-19, for children, infants, the elderly, those who are pregnant, and those with chronic illness.

It is recommended to seek medical attention promptly if you do experience more severe symptoms such as shortness of breath, severe cough, dizziness, chest pain or heart palpitations.

For non-emergency health information or advice, call 8-1-1 to speak with a [health services navigator](#). The navigator will help you find the information you are looking for or connect you with a [registered nurse](#), [registered dietitian](#), [qualified exercise professional](#) or a [pharmacist](#).

### Prescription Medications

During a state of emergency, pharmacists can provide a drug without a prescription to ensure the health and safety of the public. For more information visit the [College of Pharmacists of British Columbia – Accessing Medications You May Need During a State of Emergency](#). People who use rescue medications such as inhalers should carry them at all times during wildfire season.

## Walk-in Clinics

To find a walk-in clinic in your area, search the [HealthLink BC Directory](#) or call 8-1-1 to speak with a health services navigator. Health services navigators are available 24/7, everyday of the year.

## Wildfires and COVID-19

Exposure to air pollution can irritate your lungs, cause inflammation and alter your immune response. This can make it harder for your body to fight respiratory infections such as COVID-19. For more information on COVID-19 and wildfires, see [BC Centre for Disease Control's Wildfires](#) page.

If you have been ordered to evacuate your home due to wildfire or another hazard, it's important to use COVID-19 prevention practices as much as possible. Ways to stay safe include:

- Maintaining a safe physical distance from others (6 feet or 2 meters)
- Washing your hands regularly or using hand sanitizer
- Coughing and sneezing into your elbow or sleeve
- Wear a mask in indoor, confined or crowded spaces

Take particular precaution to avoid contact with others if you have received an evacuation order and have any of the following:

- You have been diagnosed with COVID-19, or
- You have cold-like, flu-like or COVID-19 symptoms, no matter how mild, or
- You are self-isolating after international travel or possible exposure to COVID-19

Please ensure to

- Follow any guidance provided by local public health officials
- Register with community Emergency Support Services using the [ERA tool](#). Or, call the community Emergency Support Services Reception centre telephone number if provided
- Follow Emergency Management British Columbia's general [emergency evacuee guidance for the public](#).
- If you must register at a reception site in person, it is imperative that you maintain appropriate physical distance. If you have a mask or face covering, wearing it will provide more protection to others

Anyone with symptoms of COVID-19 can assess whether they need to be tested using the [COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#). If you need a test and have been evacuated out of your home community, find the COVID-19 Collection Centre nearest to you. Visit [BC Centre for Disease Control's Testing information](#) page for information and to find a centre.

## Air Quality

You can check for an [air quality advisory](#) in your area. If the air is smoky and you find it is hard to breathe, seek medical attention right away.

Poor air quality can be harmful to your health, especially for those with heart and lung conditions, older adults, and children. For more information about air quality, including current air quality advisories, see:

- [AirMap \(For Metro Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley communities\)](#)
- [Government of British Columbia: Air quality advisory](#)
- [Government of British Columbia: Latest news and updates from B.C. air quality](#)
- [Government of Canada: Air quality and health](#)
- [Government of Canada: WeatherCAN smartphone application \(provides air quality alerts\)](#)
- [Particulate Matter and Outdoor Air Pollution](#) (HealthLinkBC File #65e)

For air quality information from your health authority, click on the links below:

- [Interior Health: Air Quality](#)
- [Island Health: Air Quality](#)
- [Northern Health: Air Quality](#)
- [Vancouver Coastal Health: Air Quality](#)

### Staying Cool Indoors during Poor Air Quality

When the air quality in your area is poor, officials may recommend that you keep your windows closed. If your windows are closed and you do not have air conditioning (or it is not running), you will need to take special care to stay cool. Make sure to stay up-to-date on the specific recommendations for your area. Visit [BC Air Quality: Advisories](#) for current information. For more information on how to stay cool indoors, see our [Beat the Heat](#) Health Feature.

### Dealing with Stress and Trauma

Disasters, such as wildfires, can impact your emotional health as much as your physical health. Learn what you can do to recognize signs of stress or trauma in yourself and your family.

- [BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre](#) (PDF 450 KB)
- [Canadian Mental Health Association: Talk in Tough Times: Support for those affected by the BC wildfires](#)
- [First Nations Health Authority: Recognizing and Resolving Trauma in Children During Disasters](#)
- [Signs of Stress](#)
- [Stress in Children and Teenagers](#)
- [Stress Management](#)
- [Stress Management: Helping Your Child With Stress](#)

### After a Wildfire

#### Returning Home

When your local or First Nations government has declared it is safe for you to return home, there are steps you can take to make the transition easier and safer. Learn more by visiting [Government of B.C.: Recover after a Wildfire](#).

## Food Safety and Water Quality

If there is a wildfire in your area, the power might go out in your community. Fire retardants may be used in or near your community to reduce the size of the fires and lessen their impact. Find out how to protect water supplies and food affected by fire retardants or power outages.

- [Disinfecting Drinking Water](#) (HealthLinkBC File #49b)
- [Interior Health: Power Outages at Food Facilities](#)
- [Interior Health: Recommended Precautions for Water and Food Affected by Fire Retardants](#)
- [Returning to Your Home After Wildfires](#)
- [Wildfire: Its Effects on Drinking Water Quality](#) (HealthLinkBC File #49f)

## Useful Websites

### BC Centre for Disease Control

The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) is an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. They provide provincial and national leadership in public health through surveillance, detection, prevention and consultation.

Information about wildfire smoke, and its health impacts, including information on how to prepare for wildfire season can be found on:

- [BC Centre for Disease Control: Wildfire Smoke](#)
- [BC Centre for Disease Control: BC Asthma Prediction System](#)

### BC Government: Environment and Sustainability

The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Sustainability provides information on caring for our environment which includes keeping our air and water supply fresh, clean and healthy. To learn more about the state of the air around us visit:

- [Government of British Columbia : Air Quality Data](#)

### Health Canada

Health Canada is the federal government department that is responsible for helping Canadians maintain and improve their health. Learn more about indoor and outdoor air quality, health effects of air pollution, wildfire smoke and your health:

- [Government of Canada: Air quality and health](#)

Last updated: July 2022