



# Wildfires and your health

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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 [BC 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 [BC Centre for Disease Control: Wildfire Smoke](#).

## 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 health symptoms and know where to find the latest information on wildfires in your area, including community evacuation orders. During and 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](#).

There are also specific emergency management resources for [Indigenous communities and local governments](#), and [Indigenous disaster response resources](#) compiled by the National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health.

## Before a wildfire

During wildfire season, roads may be closed, you may be cut off from critical supplies and services, or your community may be evacuated. There are many resources available to help you learn how to prepare for an emergency situation, or an evacuation alert or order.

- [Canadian Red Cross: Wildfires - Before, During & After](#)
- [Canadian Red Cross: Make an Emergency Plan](#)
- [Government of British Columbia: Build an emergency kit and grab-and-go bag](#)
- [Government of British Columbia: Getting ready before a wildfire](#)
- [Government of Canada: Wildfires – Get Prepared](#)
- [BC Wildfire Service: How do evacuation orders and alerts work?](#)

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

- [BC Children’s Hospital: Diabetes Emergency Survival Pack](#) (PDF, 90.3 KB)

- [BC Renal Agency: Emergency Preparedness](#)
- [College of Pharmacists of British Columbia: Accessing Medications You May Need During a State of Emergency](#)

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 they worsen, seek prompt medical attention.

Find local information from health authorities on wildfires:

- [First Nations Health Authority: Wildfire Response](#)
- [Fraser Health: Wildfire smoke](#)
- [Interior Health: Wildfires](#)
- [Island Health: Wildfires](#)
- [Northern Health: Wildfires and your health](#)
- [Vancouver Coastal Health: Wildfire smoke](#)

## Evacuation information

[EmergencyInfoBC](#) is active during partial and full-scale provincial emergencies and will share event information during emergencies. 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 [CivicInfo 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.

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

- [Government of British Columbia: Staying safe during a wildfire](#)
- [Government of British Columbia: Emergency Support Service program](#)

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 airways as well as the cardiovascular system. When smoke levels are high, everyone should be monitoring their symptoms, but those with a history of asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD), other respiratory conditions or heart problems should be monitored more closely. Sometimes smoky air can increase the risk of certain infections, such as COVID-19, for children, infants, older adults, those who are pregnant, and those with chronic illnesses.

It is recommended to seek medical attention promptly if you do experience more severe symptoms such as shortness of breath, severe cough, 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 hours a day, 7 days of the week, every day of the year.

## Air quality

Make sure to stay up-to-date on the specific recommendations for your area. Visit [BC Air Quality: Advisories](#) for current information.

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:

- [Government of British Columbia: Air](#)
- [BC Centre for Disease Control: Wildfire Smoke](#)
- [Government of British Columbia: B.C. air quality news](#)
- [Government of Canada: WeatherCAN smartphone application](#)
- [Metro Vancouver: AirMap](#)
- [Particulate matter and outdoor air pollution](#) (HealthLinkBC File #65e)

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

- [First Nations Health Authority: Air Purifier Support During Wildfire Season](#) (PDF, 155 KB)
- [Fraser Health: Air quality](#)
- [Interior Health: Air Quality](#)

- [Northern Health: Air quality \(indoor/outdoor\)](#)
- [Vancouver Coastal Health: Air quality](#)

## Heat and air quality

Heat and air pollution affect your body in different ways, and some people are susceptible to the effects of both. Cooler, cleaner indoor air is the best way to protect yourself from heat and air pollution. Heat poses a bigger risk than smoke for most people, so prioritize staying cool. Read about [how to stay cool indoors](#).

## 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, especially during hot weather](#) (PDF, 4.5 MB). If the air is smoky, and you find it is hard to breathe, seek medical attention right away.

## 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](#)
- [Canadian Mental Health Association: Talk in Tough Times: Support for those affected by BC's wildfires](#)
- [First Nations Health Authority: Recognizing and Resolving Trauma in Children During Disasters](#) (PDF, 1,965 KB)
- [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 at [Government of British Columbia: 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)
- [First Nations Health Authority: Returning to Your Home After Wildfires](#) (PDF 246 KB)

- [Government of Canada: Food and drinking water safety in an emergency](#)
- [Interior Health: Power Outages at Food Facilities](#) (PDF 395 KB)
- [Interior Health: Food Safety and Reopening Your Business After a Wildfire](#) (PDF 172 KB)
- [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: BC Asthma Prediction System](#)
- [BC Centre for Disease Control: Wildfire Smoke](#)

### Government of British Columbia: 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 advisories](#).

### 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, see [Government of Canada: Air quality and health](#).

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For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files) or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.