

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 [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 and your health](#).

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 During COVID-19](#)
- 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.

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

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 [FireSmart Canada, Protecting Your Community from Wildfire](#).

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, speak with a medical professional.

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

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

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

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

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), lung cancer or heart problems, you should monitor your symptoms. Sometimes smoky air can increase the risk of certain infections 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](#).

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.

Air Quality

If there is an [air quality advisory](#) in your area, and you find it is hard to breathe or are wheezing, seek medical attention right away.

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

- [Government of BC: BC Air Quality](#)
 - [Air Quality Advisories](#)
 - [AirMap \(For Metro Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley communities\)](#)
- [Government of Canada: Air Quality and health](#)
- [Particulate Matter and Outdoor Air Pollution](#) (HealthLinkBC File #65e)
- [Wildfire Smoke and Your Health](#)

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 an Air Quality Advisory

When there is an air quality advisory in your area, officials may recommend that you keep your windows closed with the air conditioner on (if you have one). Or, they may tell you to keep your windows closed with the air conditioner off. When your windows are closed and the air conditioner is off (or you don't have one), 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)
- [Recognizing and Resolving Trauma in Children During Disasters](#) (PDF 1.91 MB)
- [Signs of Stress](#)
- [Stress Management](#)
- [Stress in Children and Teenagers](#)
- [Stress Management: Helping Your Child With Stress](#)
- [Talk in Tough Times: Support for those affected by the 2017 BC wildfires](#)

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.

- [Government of B.C. Recovering 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)
- [Fire Retardants: Recommended Precautions for Water and Food](#) (PDF 125 KB)
- [Power Outages at Food Facilities](#) (PDF 258 KB)

- [Water and Food Quality: Information for Evacuees Returning after a Fire](#) (PDF 358 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:

- [BCCDC: Wildfire Smoke](#)
- [BCCDC: 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

- [BC Government: Air Quality](#)

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: November 2021