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Riverside County Health officials warn residents that smoke from wildfire west of Murrieta could be harmful

Riverside County health officials are warning residents – particularly those in Southwest Riverside County -- the wildfire burning near Murrieta could have an impact on their health through the smoke and ash the flames are generating.

Wildfire smoke, which is a mixture of small particles, gases and water vapor, is covering portions of the western county and could cause residents health problems ranging from burning eyes, runny nose, shortness of breath, scratchy throat, headaches, chest pains and a variety of health problems. The smoke can also worsen conditions related to asthma, chronic heart and lung disease.

“The health issues raised by the wildfire stretch beyond the areas where the flames are burning,” said Susan Harrington, director of the County of Riverside Department of Public Health. “There are small steps that residents can take to prevent the smoke from impacting their lives. It is important that residents recognize the smoke presents a health hazard.”

The American Lung Association has some general recommendations for those in areas where smoke is present.

People living in close proximity to the fire-stricken areas should remain indoors and avoid inhalation of smoke, ashes, and particulate matter in the area. Ordinary dust masks, designed to filter out large particles, will not help as they still allow the more dangerous smaller particles to pass through.

If you live close to or in the surrounding area, it's recommended that you refrain from exercising outdoors, especially if you smell smoke or experience eye or throat irritation.

Extra precautions should be taken for children, who are more susceptible to smoke because their respiratory systems are still developing and they breathe in more air (and consequently more pollution) per pound of body mass than adults.

When driving your car through smoky areas, keep your windows and vents closed. Air conditioning should only be operated in the "recirculate" setting.

People with respiratory problems or chronic heart disease should:

Stay inside as much as possible, with doors, windows and fireplace dampers shut and preferably with clean air circulating through air conditioners and/or air cleaners. Use air conditioners on the recirculation setting so outside air will not be moved into the room.

Due to the higher levels of pollutants in some areas, there is a possibility of experiencing increased symptoms. If you are experiencing symptoms, contact your physician. Asthma patients can follow the asthma action plan developed with their physician. Use your peak flow meter as prescribed. Do not hesitate to take your medication.

If outdoor trips in smoky areas are necessary, breathe through a damp cloth to help filter out particles in the air.

People with asthma should check with their physician regarding any changes in medication that may be needed to cope with the smoky conditions.

If pulmonary symptoms are not relieved by the usual medications, seek medical attention. Symptoms to watch for include wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty taking a full breath, chest heaviness, light headedness or dizziness. If you have any concerns or questions, please contact your physician.

If you develop a persistent cough or have difficulty breathing, call your physician. The onset of symptoms can appear as late as 24 to 48 hours after exposure and smoke and ash can remain in areas for many days after the fire has ended.