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Smoke, ash from Banning fire raises health concerns

Riverside County health officials are warning residents – particularly those in the San Geronio Pass area -- the wildfire burning in the Banning area could have an impact on their health through the smoke and soot the flames are generating.

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

“The health issues raised by the wildfire stretch beyond the areas where the flames are burning,” said Dr. Cameron Kaiser, public health officer for Riverside County. “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 notice eye or throat irritation.
- Extra precaution 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 in smoky areas, keep your windows and vents closed. Air conditioning should only be operated in the "recirculate" setting.

People with respiratory problems and 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, please try to contact your physician. If you cannot, asthma patients can follow the asthma action plan developed with their physician. Use your peak flow meter if prescribed. Do not hesitate to take your medication, and avail yourself of the full spectrum of medications your doctor has prescribed to you.

- 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.
- People using oxygen should not adjust their levels of intake before consulting a physician. (Call your doctor BEFORE you take any action.)
- If pulmonary symptoms are not relieved by the usual medicines, seek medical attention. Symptoms to watch for: wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty taking a full breath, chest heaviness, light headedness, and dizziness. If you have any concerns or questions please contact your physician.
- If you develop a persistent cough, or difficult or painful breathing, call your physician. The onset of symptoms can appear as late as 24 to 48 hours after exposure and that smoke can remain in areas for many days after the fires have ended.