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Health officials warn San Jacinto Mountain communities about dangers of smoke

Riverside County health officials warn that smoke and ash from a fire that has scorched thousands of acres could affect residents' health in the San Jacinto Mountain communities.

The Mountain Fire has charred more than 8,000 acres of rugged hillside and generated a massive column of smoke and ash visible throughout Riverside County. Fire officials have suggested the fire could burn for several days. Health officials are concerned that prolonged exposure to smoke and ash could harm residents in the mountain communities, including Idyllwild, Pine Cove, Mountain Center and Pinyon Pines.

"Flames are a danger but with a fire this size, residents also need to protect against smoke and ash," said Susan Harrington, director of the County of Riverside Department of Public Health. "Taking small steps can help prevent smoke from affecting residents' lives. It is important to recognize the health hazard."

Wildfire smoke – a mixture of small particles, gases and water vapor – has blanketed portions of the county and could cause problems that include burning eyes, runny nose, shortness of breath, scratchy throat, headaches and chest pains. Smoke also can worsen conditions related to asthma, and chronic heart and lung disease.

The American Lung Association has some general recommendations for those in areas where smoke is present. People affected by the smoke should remain indoors and avoid inhaling smoke and ash. Ordinary dust masks designed to filter out large particles will not help because they still allow the more dangerous small particles to pass through.

If you live close to or in the surrounding area, you should 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.

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