Use visibility guides, where they’re available. Not every community has a monitor that measures particle levels in the air. In the western United States, some areas without air quality monitors have developed guidelines to help people estimate the AQI based on how far they can see. Check with your local air quality agency to find out if there’s a visibility guide for your area.

Use common sense. If it looks smoky outside, it’s probably not a good time to mow the lawn or go for a run. And it’s probably not a good time for your children to play outdoors.

How to tell if smoke is affecting you:

Smoke may smell good, but it’s not good for you.

Smoke is made up of a complex mixture of gases and fine particles produced when wood and other organic matter burn. The biggest health threat from smoke comes from fine particles. These microscopic particles can get into your eyes and respiratory system, where they can cause health problems such as burning eyes, runny nose, and illnesses such as bronchitis. Fine particles also can aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases – and even are linked to premature deaths in people with these conditions.

Some people are more susceptible than others:

If you have heart or lung disease, such as congestive heart failure, angina, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema or asthma, you may experience health effects earlier and at lower smoke levels than healthy people.

Older adults are more likely to be affected by smoke, possibly because they are more likely to have heart or lung diseases than younger people.

Children also are more susceptible to smoke for several reasons: their respiratory systems are still developing; they breathe more air (and air pollution) per pound of body weight than adults; and they’re more likely to be active outdoors.

How to tell if smoke is affecting you:

Smoke can irritate the eyes and airways, causing coughing, a scratchy throat, irritated sinuses, headaches, stinging eyes or a runny nose. If you have heart or lung disease, smoke might make your symptoms worse.

People with heart disease might experience chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath, or fatigue. People with lung disease may not be able to breathe as deeply or as vigorously as usual, and they may experience symptoms such as coughing, phlegm, chest discomfort, wheezing and shortness of breath.

When smoke levels are high enough, even healthy people may experience some of these symptoms.

Protect yourself!

It’s important to limit your exposure to smoke – especially if you may be susceptible. Here are some steps you can take to protect your health:

Pay attention to local air quality reports. Stay alert to any news coverage or health warnings related to smoke. Also find out if your community reports EPA’s Air Quality Index (AQI). The AQI, based on data from local air quality monitors, tells you about the daily air quality in your area and recommends precautions you can take to protect your health. As smoke gets worse, the concentration of particles in the air changes – and so do the steps you should take to protect yourself.

If smoke is affecting your area, check your local media for information on air quality and how to protect your health.

Help keep particle levels inside lower. When smoke levels are high, try to avoid using anything that burns, such as wood fireplaces, gas logs, gas stoves – and even candles! Don’t vacuum. That stirs up particles already inside your home. And don’t smoke. That puts even more pollution in your lungs, and in the lungs of people around you.

If you are advised to stay indoors, take steps to keep indoor air as clean as possible. Keep your windows and doors closed – unless it’s extremely hot outside. Run your air conditioner, if you have one. Keep the fresh air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent bringing additional smoke inside. Note: If you don’t have an air conditioner, staying inside with the windows closed may be dangerous in extremely hot weather. In these cases, seek alternative shelter.

Smoke may smell good, but it’s not good for you.

If you are healthy, you’re usually not at a major risk from smoke. Still, it’s a good idea to avoid breathing smoke if you can help it.

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If you have asthma or other lung disease, make sure you follow your doctor’s directions about taking your medicines and following your asthma management plan. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

If you have heart or lung disease, if you are an older adult, or if you have children, talk with your doctor about whether and when you should leave the area. When smoke is heavy for a prolonged period of time, fine particles can build up indoors even though you may not be able to see them.

Air cleaners can help indoors – but buy before a fire.

Some room air cleaners can help reduce particle levels indoors, as long as they are the right type and size for your home. If you choose to buy an air cleaner, don’t wait until there’s a fire – make that decision beforehand.

Note: Don’t use an air cleaner that generates ozone. That just puts more pollution in your home.

For more information about home air cleaners, go to: www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/residair.html

Dust masks aren’t enough!

Paper “comfort” or “dust” masks – the kinds you commonly can buy at the hardware store – are designed to trap large particles, such as sawdust. These masks generally will not protect your lungs from the fine particles in smoke.

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