



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF  
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE  
Alister F. Martin, MD, MPP  
*Commissioner*

## **2026 Health Advisory #9: Reduce Health Impacts Caused By Air Quality Events During Wildfire Season**

Please distribute to all clinical staff in emergency medicine, family medicine, geriatrics, internal medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, pharmacy, and primary care.

When NYC air quality is impacted by wildfire smoke:

- Exposure to fine particles from smoke and coarse particles from ash can cause coughing, wheezing, and difficulty breathing.
- Advise people to pay attention to symptoms, reduce physical activity and go indoors if they experience watery eyes, scratchy throat or difficulty breathing.
- Keep windows closed when indoors.
- Very hot weather can be more dangerous than poor air quality. If it is hot outside, people should find a cool indoor space.
- Most healthy people recover quickly from wildfire smoke exposure and do not suffer long-term health consequences.
- Monitor changing air quality conditions at: [airnow.gov](https://airnow.gov).

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May 12, 2026

Dear Colleagues,

As a result of conditions created by our changing climate, wildfires in the United States and Canada have been increasing in frequency and intensity, and the smoke sometimes impacts New York City air quality. The smoke can result in dangerously increased PM<sub>2.5</sub> (very fine particulate matter) and can irritate the eyes, nose, throat, and lungs.

Air quality levels fluctuate and can be hard to forecast. Advise people to monitor the news and check the EPA's website [airnow.gov](https://airnow.gov) for changing air quality conditions. These sources will report the Air Quality Index (AQI), which describes how clean or polluted the air is and associated health effects.

When air quality is very poor, it is considered unhealthy for everyone, and all New Yorkers should try to limit strenuous and prolonged (more than one hour) outdoor activities.

Some people are more sensitive than others to air pollution, including wildfire smoke, and should try to avoid unnecessary outdoor activities even when the AQI shows the air is less polluted.

While predicting the impacts of wildfire smoke for the city is difficult, we must anticipate potential poor air quality and prepare our communities.

### **Groups that may be more sensitive to wildfire smoke**

- People with heart or respiratory conditions, such as asthma or COPD
- People who are immunocompromised
- Older adults
- People who are pregnant
- Infants and children (especially young children) with heart or respiratory conditions or who are immunocompromised
- People with social vulnerabilities, such as lack of access to safe housing or health care, lack of transportation, and other protective factors

Provide people with the preventative guidance below and advise them to consult with you and/or other providers if they have questions or feel ill.

### **Reduce the effects of wildfire smoke**

- Listen to your body — if you are feeling the effects from poor air quality like watery eyes, scratchy throat or difficulty breathing, reduce physical activity and/or go indoors.
- Keep windows closed when you are indoors.
- Very hot weather can be more dangerous than poor air quality. If it is hot outside, make sure you find a cool indoor space. If you don't have AC, try to move to a public air-conditioned place like a library, visit a friend or family with home AC, or another cool place using the [Cool Options website](#). If you must stay home without AC, keep your windows open, but seek help if you are experiencing the effects from poor air quality. For more information, see the 2026 Health Advisory #6 "[Help Prevent Heat-Related Illness and Death](#)".
- If you use AC, close the fresh air intake setting to avoid bringing smokey air indoors.
- Use an air purifier if you have one and set it at the highest level.
- Wearing high-quality masks (N-95 or KN95) can reduce smoke exposure if you must be outdoors but is not a substitute for staying indoors. Read [guidance on mask use](#).
- Monitor changing air quality conditions on [EPA Air Now](#).
- Follow [Health Department guidance](#) for activity recommendations when air quality changes.
- Encourage people to sign up for [Notify NYC](#) messages from the City of New York to receive emergency updates and alerts.

- For AQI above 200 (categorized as “Very Unhealthy” or “Hazardous”), consider rescheduling appointments or using telehealth, depending on circumstances.

### **Health effects of wildfire smoke**

- Most healthy people recover quickly from wildfire smoke exposure and do not suffer long-term health consequences. See [Wildfire Smoke Considerations for Public Health Officials](#).
- Exposure to fine particles from smoke and coarse particles from ash are the primary documented public health threat from wildfire smoke and can cause coughing, wheezing, and difficulty breathing.
- The adverse short-term health impact of wildfire smoke has been most prominently shown in asthma emergency department visits in NYC, NY State, and other U.S. regions. Wildfire smoke is also known to exacerbate cardiovascular conditions that can result in hospitalizations and deaths.

For additional insights on providing healthcare during air quality events, read the following:

- [Clinical Outcomes Related to Particulate Matter Exposure and Cardiovascular Disease](#)
- [Climate Resilience for Frontline Clinics Toolkit](#)
- [Register for Lincoln Hospital’s Lunch and Learn webinar series about pediatric asthma](#)

Thank you for your help in keeping New Yorkers healthy and safe.

Sincerely,

*Sarah Johnson*

Sarah Johnson, MS, MPH  
Executive Director, Air Quality Program  
Bureau of Environmental Surveillance and Policy

*Toni Eyssallenne*

Toni Eyssallenne, MD, PhD  
Deputy Chief Medical Officer  
Office of the Chief Medical Officer