

THE DANGERS OF BUSHFIRE SMOKE UNMASKED

The gases and fine particles produced during a bushfire can make underlying respiratory and cardiac diseases worse and wearing certain masks won't help.

Nephrologist and Chairperson for Doctors for the Environment Australia Victorian Committee, Dr Katherine Barraclough said bushfire smoke is made of gases and particles, many of which can be detrimental to human health.

"One of the most damaging particles is called PM2.5. It's incredibly small and can be inhaled deep into the lungs," Dr Barraclough said.

While cloth and paper masks may feel helpful, they offer a false sense of security. These masks are not designed to filter out PM2.5 particles.

"We know these masks don't filter out the tiny particles in smoke that cause the most damage to health. This includes PM2.5, but also PM10 which can cause lung damage," she said.

"P2 masks are helpful to inhibit the tiny PM2.5 and PM10 particles that make bushfire smoke dangerous, but they need to have a really tight air seal around the nose and mouth for the mask to be effective."

"Facial hair, beards or anything that stops the mask from giving a really tight fit needs to be addressed for optimum performance," she said.

Melbourne is facing a shortage of P2 masks currently so exposure to severe amounts of bushfire smoke for extended periods of time should be avoided.

Dr Barraclough said the people most-at-risk are those with underlying heart and lung conditions.

"Also, the elderly, young children and pregnant women."

PM2.5 and PM10 can cause irritation of the eyes, the nose and throat in people. They can also cause coughing, wheezing and other respiratory symptoms even in those who have never had a respiratory condition, however, for those with underlying respiratory conditions, they can exacerbate symptoms.

"The really worrying thing about PM2.5 is that it's so fine, it can be absorbed into the blood stream and from there it can lead to inflammation, affect the heart and sometimes trigger heart attacks," Dr Barraclough said.

"It has also been associated with strokes and blood clots."

In early December Sydney experienced a 25 per cent increase in respiratory presentations than the weekly average and the NSW Ambulance Service experienced a 50 per cent increase in respiratory callouts in the first six days of 2020 compared to the same period last year.

The levels of air pollution were up to 11 times the hazardous levels.

But Dr Barraclough said the important thing is to recognise that there is no safe level of air pollution – any level of air pollution is bad for health.

"These statistics show that the smoke is having short term health impacts but what remains to be seen is the long-term health impacts."

Dr Barraclough said the statistics for Victoria were unavailable at this time.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO LIMIT EXPOSURE

- Stay indoors

- Keep windows and doors closed and sealed before smoke gets inside

- Most air conditioners don't have filters for PM2.5 particles. Set your air-con to circulate the indoor air rather than taking air from the outside

"This really is uncharted territory, particularly this prolonged bushfire smoke. Impacts on short term and long-term health of the population is concerning so one of the major priorities is to look after any underlying health conditions you may have," Dr Barraclough said.

"If you have asthma and you've been prescribed preventors make sure you take them before the smoke impacts you and have an asthma management plan in place if you have to evacuate."

"Ensure you have all your medications and check on people around you that have respiratory diseases," she said.

If you experience difficulties breathing or shortness of breath seek medical advice immediately.

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