

## Advice for older people

**Bushfire smoke can reduce the quality of the air you breathe. This fact sheet provides information on what you can do to avoid or reduce the impact of smoke on the health of an older person.**

### **How can bushfire smoke affect health?**

Smoke from a bushfire is made up of large particulate matter from burning debris which irritates the eyes, nose, throat and lungs. The finer particles are able to penetrate deep into the lung tissue and are more harmful. Smoke also contains toxic gases, such as carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides.

Bushfire smoke, if present in high enough concentrations, can cause a number of health problems, such as:

- > Shortness of breath
- > Wheezing and coughing
- > Burning eyes
- > Running nose
- > Chest tightness
- > Chest pain
- > Dizziness or light-headedness.

Bushfire smoke can aggravate existing health problems, such as:

- > Chronic bronchitis
- > Emphysema
- > Asthma and other chronic respiratory diseases
- > Heart conditions.

Symptoms can occur after exposure so it is important to be vigilant and to continue any previously prescribed treatment.

There are many factors that determine the impact of bushfire smoke on an older person's health, including:

- > How much smoke the person was exposed to
- > Age of the person
- > Existing health problems, such as respiratory or heart disease.





## **Preventative measures**

To minimise the effect from exposure to bushfire smoke:

- > Stay indoors and close windows, doors and, where possible, air vents.
- > Stay in air-conditioned premises, if possible. Switch refrigerated air-conditioner to 'recycle' or 'recirculate'. Evaporative air conditioners should be turned off at the first sign of thick, heavy smoke.
- > Reduce other sources of air pollution or household activities such as cooking with gas, burning candles or vacuum cleaning.
- > Avoid vigorous activities especially if the older person has asthma or other chronic lung or heart conditions.

If the older person is susceptible to the effects of bushfire smoke and it is safe to leave the premises, consider:

- > Staying with a friend or relative whose house has clean indoor air
- > Leaving the area for a cleaner environment
- > If you are registered with your local community health service or Telecross, remember to advice of any changes to your whereabouts.

## **Face masks**

Ordinary paper dusk masks, handkerchiefs or bandanas do not filter out fine particles from bushfire smoke and are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.

Special masks (called 'P2') filter bushfire smoke, providing a greater protection against inhaling fine particles. They are available at most hardware stores. However before deciding to wear a mask it is important to understand that:

- > They can be hot and uncomfortable to wear
- > They can make it harder to breathe normally – anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition should seek medical advice before using them
- > If the seal around the face and mouth is poor, the mask is much less effective
- > The masks do not filter out gases such as carbon monoxide
- > It is better to stay indoors away from the smoke.



### **Seek medical assistance if:**

- > The older person has a pre-existing condition heart or lung condition (such as asthma) and develops symptoms such as shortness of breath, cough, wheezing, or chest pain, and the symptoms do not settle after rest and / or the prescribed medication treatment plan
- > The older person's health declines rapidly or suffers chest pain or a severe asthma attack
- > The older person is on oxygen treatment and their breathlessness worsens.

**If the older person has difficulty breathing, chest pain or a severe asthma attack seek urgent medical assistance by calling 000 for an ambulance.**

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**For more information**

**Emergency Management Unit**  
**[www.sahealth.gov.au](http://www.sahealth.gov.au)**

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