



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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Cooler Weather Signals Start of Air-Quality Alert Season

The Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department has begun issuing daily air-quality alerts to let people know if they need to take precautions to protect their health from air pollution.

The department monitors air quality year-round. But during the cold months – when people are heating their homes and temperature inversions can trap polluted air in the Helena Valley – the department provides daily updates to notify residents of any need to restrict burning or limit physical activity.

When air quality is poor, the department issues temporary restrictions on burning throughout the Air Pollution Control District, which includes the North Valley and the communities of Helena and East Helena. During these episodes, some residents might have to stop using solid-fuel burning devices like fireplaces and woodstoves until the public-health risk diminishes.

Smoke from woodstoves is the primary source of winter particulate air pollution throughout Lewis and Clark County. Exposure to wood smoke can cause reduced lung function, headaches, and chronic bronchitis. It can also aggravate existing lung disease.

Air Quality Designations

The health department designates air quality using these terms:

- **GOOD** – Particulate levels are low, and there are no restrictions on the proper use of solid-fuel burning devices.
- **WATCH** – Air quality is moderate, and particulate levels are not expected to improve. Residents are asked to voluntarily avoid or reduce the use of solid-fuel burning devices, especially fireplaces and stoves that aren't certified by the Environmental Protection Agency. A list of certified stoves is available on the health department website at www.HelenaAir.org.
- **POOR** – Particulate levels are high, and the National Weather Service predicts poor dispersion conditions. Indoors, residents may use only pellet stoves and EPA-certified burning devices. Smoke emitted from these devices may not exceed 20 percent opacity. This can be achieved by following proper burning practices (see below).

Weather conditions can change quickly, and residents may be fined if they violate burning restrictions during a “poor” air stage. So it's important to check air quality if you plan to burn.

The mission of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.

To learn the daily status of local air quality:

- check local media;
- call the health department's 24-hour air quality hotline, 406-447-1644;
- sign up for daily e-mail updates at outdoorAQ@co.lewis-clark.mt.us; or
- visit the department's website, www.LewisandClarkHealth.org.

Exemptions and Variances

Anyone enrolled in the Low Income Energy Assistance Program or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program may apply for an exemption to burn an older wood-burning device when the air quality is "poor." Anyone whose gas or electric heating system is temporarily inoperable may also be eligible for an exemption.

If you don't meet the exemption requirements, you can apply for a variance to the regulations. The variance will be heard before the Board of Health or a hearings officer. Exemption and variance application forms are available by calling 406-447-8351.

Proper Burning

Burning a clean, hot fire can help to minimize the negative health effects of air pollution. It also cuts back on creosote buildup in your chimney, which reduces the chances of a chimney fire. And it cuts down on the amount of wood you burn – saving time and money.

Here are some tips for burning properly and with less pollution:

- Make sure your stove is the right size for your needs. If your stove is too large, you'll need to damp down your fires, causing smoldering.
- Use only dry, well-seasoned, medium-sized wood.
- Start your fire with small, dry kindling to establish a hot flame.
- Don't pack too many logs into your stove or fireplace. Smaller, hotter fires are more efficient and less polluting.
- Keep air intakes/ dampers open enough to maintain a clean, hot fire.
- Check and clean your chimney regularly to avoid creosote buildup.

It's illegal in Montana to burn prohibited materials, such as garbage, building materials, plastics, and hazardous waste.

For more information, call the Environmental Services Division of the health department at 406-447-8351 or e-mail outdoorAQ@co.lewis-clark.mt.us.

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