Wildfire Smoke Almost Inevitable, So Why Not Prepare Now?

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Floods and wildfires are the most likely natural disasters to affect us here in Lewis and Clark County. Yet, all too often, some of us are caught off guard when floodwaters invade our basements or smoke fills our lungs.

Preparing for disasters and emergencies is an important part of public health. We train and practice to respond quickly to the next new infectious disease, the next threat to our drinking water, and, yes, the next bout of air pollution caused by wildfires.

Right now, health department staff are still involved with testing and decontaminating wells in Augusta as our neighbors recover from the spring floods. But we’re also starting to turn our thoughts to the next issue we might have to tackle: smoky skies that threaten the health of our hearts, lungs, and brains.

Out of the floods and into the fires!

For many of us, wildfire smoke tends to be “out of sight, out of mind.” But doesn’t it make sense to plan ahead in case we have another season like last year? This is especially true for those who are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of poor air quality: older adults, children, those with heart or breathing problems, those who smoke, and those with weak immune systems.

After all, the Northern Rockies Coordination Center in Missoula is predicting an above-average potential fire season this July and August, despite the cold, wet spring.

And as the Independent Record reported this spring, “it is no secret that wildfires and wood smoke negatively affect air quality in Helena and across Montana.” This was the lead on an article about Lewis and Clark County ranking 19th in the nation in the American Lung Association’s 2018 list of most-polluted counties.

Yet despite this information, stores ran out of air purifiers last year because people didn’t think to buy one until flames and soot were on the horizon.
Why not be proactive about caring for your health? Here are some steps you can take while the skies are still blue:

- **Invest in a portable air purifier.** Portable air cleaners come in many types and prices. Central air conditioning is better at removing harmful particles from indoor air, but a lot of us aren’t lucky enough to have it. A good portable air cleaner with a True HEPA filter (not a “HEPA-like” filter) can dramatically improve the air in a designated room, as long as it’s the right size for the space. Avoid ozone generators, which do more harm than good. Humidifiers do not clean the air.

- **Designate a “clean room” at home.** This might be easier and less expensive than trying to keep smoke out of your entire home. A good choice is an interior room with as few windows and doors as possible, like a bedroom. Set up your air cleaner here and make it your haven when outdoor air quality gets bad.

- **Ask your medical provider if you should use a respiratory mask.** A respirator provides protection only if it’s able to filter very small particles and if it fits well, providing a tight seal around the mouth and nose. In some cases, a mask can actually harm your health by making it harder to breathe. If your doctor thinks a mask is a good idea for you, choose one called a “particulate respirator” that has the word “NIOSH” and either “N95” or “P100” printed on it. These are sold at many hardware and home repair stores and pharmacies. Pick a mask that has two straps that go around your head. A one-strap paper mask is not a respirator and provides little or no protection from smoke particles.

- **Have a plan B.** If you’re a hard-core athlete or a leisurely jogger, you won’t do your health any favors if you exercise outdoors when air quality is poor. If you’re a coach or school principal, you’re responsible for the health of the young ones in your charge. Develop a plan now for what to do if air quality makes outdoor activities dangerous. The health department has written recommendations especially for schools and child-care facilities. Call us at 447-8351 to get a copy. Or you can find it on our website at [www.HelenaAir.org](http://www.HelenaAir.org/) at the link called “Activity Guidelines for Smoke Events.”

- **Sign up to get air-quality alerts.** The health department sends out email alerts to notify people about the status of air quality. You can sign up to get these by emailing outdooraq@lccountymt.gov.

You can learn more about the health impacts of poor air quality and steps you can take to protect yourself on the Lewis and Clark Public Health website: [www.HelenaAir.org](http://www.HelenaAir.org).