

Environmental Health and Safety

Industrial Hygiene:

Wildfire Smoke Event FAQs

When smoke levels are hazardous outside, what should I do?

The EPA recommends actions based on the Air Quality Index (AQI) and individual health factors. Refer to the AQI to assess outdoor activity levels and determine when it is advisable to stay indoors.

Is it safe to be on campus if smoke levels are hazardous outside?

Yes, campus air handling systems filter outside particulates and recirculate indoor air. Normal operations can continue as long as circulated air is safe. Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) will monitor select buildings during smoke events to ensure safe occupancy based on PM2.5 levels.

Will the university shut down if the levels are dangerous?

Yes, if air quality levels exceed the capabilities of campus air handling systems, operations may be restricted or shut down. The U of I administration has guidelines for emergency closures. Essential personnel are expected to report to work to maintain critical operations.

How are outside air levels measured compared to inside levels?

Outside air quality is assessed using the AQI, which includes contaminants like ozone, toxic gases, and fine particulate matter such as smoke. These are averaged to create the overall index. As AQI numbers rise, air quality worsens, prompting recommendations to limit outdoor activities.

Indoor air quality focuses on specific contaminants, particularly PM2.5, which consists of fine particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs. Indoor PM2.5 levels can be measured and compared to outdoor levels to determine if occupancy or activities should be restricted.

What is the threshold for outdoor activity on the Air Quality Index?

Outdoor activity should be avoided when the AQI reaches 300. The [Idaho DEQ Air Quality Index Table](#) outlines thresholds and action levels for outdoor activities.

What is the threshold for PM2.5 contamination indoors?

There is no established limit for indoor PM2.5 contamination. However, the university may restrict indoor activities if air quality cannot be maintained at or below hazardous outdoor levels.



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Is my office safe to work in during a large-scale smoke event?

Unless an emergency closure is declared, your office is presumed safe. Campus air handling systems provide filtered recirculated air. In buildings without these systems, keep windows and doors closed to prevent outside contaminants from entering. If you have concerns about air quality, contact EHS. For special accommodations, consult Human Resources.

Is my lab safe during a large-scale smoke event?

Yes, but access to your lab may be restricted. Fume hoods should remain active, but may need to be shut down for filter maintenance, causing temporary disruptions. If an emergency closure restricts access, coordinate with EHS for temporary entry.

I am expected to work, but I am having trouble breathing. What can I do?

Consult Human Resources for special accommodations related to your medical condition. You may wear facial coverings or dust masks for added protection. Higher level personal protective equipment, such as an N-95 respirator, requires employer approval and training, and supervisors cannot provide them without EHS involvement.

Campus is open, but I am required to work outdoors and the air quality outside is very bad. What can I do?

If your duties require outdoor work during poor air quality, supervisors may assign temporary indoor tasks until conditions improve. Administrative controls, such as shorter outdoor shifts, may also be implemented. Consult Human Resources for any necessary accommodations.

How do I know if it is safe to return to normal operations?

Administration will communicate before, during, and after smoke events. Building air systems will be activated to filter and replace air, typically before normal business hours. In buildings without ventilation systems, windows or doors may be opened to introduce fresh air.

Why is it so hot in my office?

Buildings without central air may become warmer as windows are closed to keep smoke out. Using fans or localized A/C units can help maintain comfortable temperatures. Avoid window-mounted A/C units that bring unfiltered outside air indoors. Stay hydrated and wear breathable clothing.



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As a student who walks across campus from my vehicle to class and between buildings, is it safe to do so during a smoke event?

Yes, this routine is safe. The EPA recommends reducing outdoor physical activity during high AQI levels. If conditions are hazardous, outdoor activities should be canceled.

If the AQI value is above 200, what is the safety recommendation for students and other campus community members?

Sensitive groups should avoid all outdoor physical activities and move activities indoors or reschedule them. Others should avoid prolonged or heavy exertion and consider moving activities indoors or rescheduling for better air quality.

I am sensitive to smoke, what should I do during wildfire season?

Monitor air quality throughout the fire season and follow your medical professional's advice. The CDC provides guidance for sensitive groups.

Is the indoor air quality inside my classroom good while the outdoor AQI is above 200?

EHS will monitor indoor air quality in high-traffic buildings and provide daily updates to the Smoke Event Management Team. If indoor air quality is compromised, occupants will be notified immediately to leave the building.

