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# Craven County

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## General Wildfire Smoke and Air Quality Information and Safety Tips

CRAVEN COUNTY, N.C. – Wildfire smoke produced by the Great Lakes Fire in the Croatan National Forest may continue to affect air quality in the days and possibly weeks to come or longer. The levels of smoke and geographical areas the smoke affects will vary and can change quickly with fire conditions and weather conditions. It is possible residents in some areas will not see smoke at all while people in other areas will.

Craven County residents are encouraged to learn how to stay informed of air quality levels, what different air quality levels mean and what steps they need to take to stay healthy.

“Eastern North Carolinians are used to paying attention to air quality levels connected to pollen and it is the time of year where pollen impacts many of us, but we are not used to monitoring how additional fine particles caused by wildfire smoke can affect us, said Amber M. Parker, Craven County Human Resources Director and Public Information Officer. “This is a good time to learn about air quality in general, what the different levels mean and how those sensitive to changes in air quality can prepare.”

### Groups At-Risk of Health Effects from Wildfire Smoke Exposure

Groups considered to be at-risk from wildfire smoke exposure include older adults, children, pregnant women, people who work or exercise outdoors, and those with heart conditions and respiratory ailments such as asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema. These groups are referred to as Sensitive Groups in the Air Quality Index and Sensitive Groups are those sensitive to any of the forms of air pollution the Air Quality Index measures.

### Air Quality Index (AQI)

Air quality forecasts are often reported using the Air Quality Index, or AQI, established by the US Environmental Protection Agency and regulated by the Clean Air Act. The AQI forecasts indicate how clean or polluted the air is, and what associated health effects might be a concern. The AQI measures five major types of pollutants such as particle pollution or particulate matter, ground-level ozone, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide. AQI forecasts can be found on the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality Air Portal at [www.ncair.org](http://www.ncair.org) or <https://www.airnow.gov/>.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) is divided into six categories. Each category corresponds to a different level of health concern and has a specific color.

Color	Category	Numerical Range	Description of Air Quality
Green	Good	0 to 50	Air quality is satisfactory, and air pollution poses little or no risk.
Yellow	Moderate	51 to 100	Air quality is acceptable. However, there may be a risk for some people, particularly those who are unusually sensitive to air pollution.
Orange	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	101 to 150	Members of sensitive groups may experience health effects. The general public is less likely to be affected.
Red	Unhealthy	151 to 200	Some members of the general public may experience health effects; members of sensitive groups may experience more serious health effects.
Purple	Very Unhealthy	201 to 300	Health alert: the risk of health effects is increased for everyone.
Maroon	Hazardous	301 +	Health warning of emergency conditions: everyone is more likely to be affected.

The air quality forecast released the morning of Wednesday, April 26, 2023 shows Yellow or Moderate for all of Craven County due to fine particulates. Fine particulates is the general term for a mixture of solid and liquid droplets suspended in the air and it can be made of many things such as soot, smoke, dust, dirt, pollen or mold. A Yellow or Moderate forecast means air quality is acceptable but there may be a risk for those unusually sensitive to air pollution and those individuals should consider reducing activity level or shorten the amount of time spent active outdoors. It is important to know the air quality forecast can change throughout the day and it can vary depending upon location.

### Wildfire Smoke and Health Effects

Wildfire smoke is a mix of gases and fine particulates from burning vegetation, building materials, and other materials. It is a respiratory irritant that can cause coughing, difficulty breathing normally, stinging eyes, scratchy throat, runny nose, irritated sinuses, wheezing and shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, triggering an asthma attack, fatigue, and a fast heartbeat. People who are healthy are not usually at a major risk from short-term exposures to smoke but it is a good idea to avoid breathing smoke if possible. Healthy people can get sick if there is enough smoke in the air. The biggest health threat from smoke is from fine particulates which can aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases. For more information on how wildfire smoke particulates can affect your health visit: <https://www.airnow.gov/sites/default/files/2018-03/pm-color.pdf>.

### Tips to Reduce Wildfire Smoke Exposure

Though the AQI forecast shows Green or Good air quality levels in Craven County for the next two days, it is important for citizens to know what steps they can take to reduce potential wildfire smoke related adverse health effects should levels rise in the future.

It is important to monitor local weather and air quality reports. Weather changes can rapidly increase smoke levels or change where smoke is present. If it looks smoky outside, stay indoors and run the air conditioner, if available. Keep the fresh air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent bringing additional smoke inside. Note: If air conditioning is not available, staying inside with the windows closed may be dangerous in extremely hot weather. In these cases, seek alternative shelter.

Limit outdoor exposure when smoke is in the air to reduce how much smoke is inhaled. Avoid outdoor exercise when it is smoky or choose lower-intensity activities. Smoke levels can change during the day, so wait until air quality is better before being active outdoors. If outdoor activities cannot be avoided limit them to essential tasks and take frequent breaks indoors. It is also recommended to wear an N95 respirator mask. Cloth masks will not protect you from wildfire smoke.

People with asthma, heart disease or other respiratory diseases should follow their healthcare provider's advice about taking medicines and following healthcare plans. They should also talk to their healthcare provider about what to do if symptoms worsen or when they should leave the area.

Create a cleaner air room or clean room. A clean room is a room set up to keep levels of smoke and other particles as low as possible during wildfire smoke events. A clean room should be free from activities that create particles such as cooking or smoking, and the doors and windows should be kept closed to prevent smoke from getting in. A clean room can also contain a portable air cleaner that makes the air in the room cleaner than the rest of the home. For more information on how to create a clean room visit: <https://www.airnow.gov/sites/default/files/2022-02/how-to-create-a-clean-room-at-home.pdf>.

If you have central air, run your HVAC system to filter the air. Use high-efficiency filters (rated MERV-13 or higher) and replace the filters frequently. Learn about your system and use the appropriate settings ("Recirculate" and "On" rather than "Auto"). If your system has a fresh air option, close the intake.

Avoid indoor activities that create more air pollution, such as frying foods, sweeping, vacuuming, and using gas, propane, or wood-burning stoves and furnaces.

### **Coping with the Stress of Wildfire Smoke**

Smoke from a wildfire can be a stressful reminder of a nearby threat. Even if there is no immediate danger, smoke from distant fires can be in the air for days or even weeks. Smoke can cause stress by limiting your daily outdoor activities, isolating you from friends and family, and disrupting your daily routines. For more information on coping with stress related to wildfire smoke visit: <https://www.airnow.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/coping-with-the-stress-of-wildfire-smoke.pdf>.

### **Protect Pets and Livestock from Wildfire Smoke**

Pets and livestock should also be taken into consideration. High levels of smoke may irritate animals' eyes and respiratory tract just like it can affect ours. Animals with heart or lung disease are especially at-risk and should be closely watched during periods of poor air quality. Strategies to reduce animals' exposure to smoke are like those for humans: reduce the time spent in smoky areas; if animals are indoors, keep indoor air clean; provide animals with plenty of water; limit physical activities that will increase the amount of smoke breathed into their lungs; and reduce exposure to dust or other air pollutants. If pets or livestock are coughing or having difficulty breathing, the owner should contact a veterinarian. To learn more about keeping pets and livestock safe from smoke visit:

Pets: <https://www.airnow.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/protect-your-pets-from-wildfire-smoke.pdf>

Livestock: <https://www.airnow.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/protect-your-large-animals-and-livestock-from-wildfire-smoke.pdf>