

Air quality and outdoor activity: Guide for schools and early childhood centres



Environment
Protection
Authority Victoria



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Community information

Overview

This guide can help protect children and teenagers, who are more sensitive than adults to air pollution, from smoke impacts.

Air quality during a smoke event can vary. The measurements at your nearest monitoring site may not accurately reflect conditions at your location.

Use your best judgement. If you can see or smell smoke, limit or prevent outdoor activities including planned excursions.

For any students, children and staff with known health issues, have health plans prepared (e.g. an [asthma plan](#)).

You can check air quality at epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch

You can find out more information about smoke and your health at epa.vic.gov.au/smoke-health

For further information, updates and advice about incidents affecting air quality in your area, go to <http://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/>

How to reduce smoke entering your school and early childhood centre building

Close all windows and doors. Switch air-conditioners to recirculate or reuse air. If they do not have that function, turn them off.

When smoky conditions have cleared, or there is a break in smoky conditions, open windows and doors to air out rooms.

What to do if external windows can't be closed

Consider your facility Emergency Management Plan procedure for smoke. One possibility is using the nominated [shelter-in-place building](#). This can provide a temporary protective measure from a predicted smoke attack from a fire or other outdoor hazardous pollution.

More information on shelter-in-place relevant to educational services is available at:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/management/Pages/shelter-in-place.aspx>



Air quality and outdoor activity

Air quality categories

This table shows when and how to change your outdoor activity based on EPA's [air quality categories](#).

Air quality category	Outdoor activity guidance
Good	It's a good time to be outside.
Moderate	It's okay to be outside but watch for changes in air quality around you.
Poor	<p>Shorter and less strenuous activities, such as recess, are okay to hold outside.</p> <p>Longer activities such as physical education or sports training should be avoided outdoors.</p> <p>Watch for symptoms* and take action as needed.</p> <p>Anyone with asthma should follow their asthma action plans and keep their quick-relief medicine handy.</p> <p>Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.</p>
Very poor	<p>Move all activities indoors or reschedule them to another day.</p> <p>Avoid being outdoors.</p> <p>Excessive smoke levels can not only aggravate existing lung conditions, but may also irritate eyes, coughing or wheezing.</p> <p>Anyone with asthma should follow their asthma action plans and keep their quick-relief medicine handy.</p> <p>Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.</p>
Hazardous	<p>Reschedule all physical activities to another day.</p> <p>Avoid being outdoors.</p> <p>Excessive smoke levels can not only aggravate existing lung conditions, but may also irritate eyes, coughing or wheezing.</p> <p>Anyone with asthma should follow their asthma action plans and keep their quick-relief medicine handy.</p> <p>Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.</p>

*Watch for symptoms

Air pollution can make asthma symptoms worse and trigger attacks. Symptoms of asthma include coughing, wheezing, difficulty breathing, and chest tightness. Even students, children and staff who do not have asthma could experience these symptoms.

If symptoms occur:

The student or staff member might need to take a break, do a less intense activity, stop all activity, go indoors, or use quick-relief medicine as prescribed. If symptoms don't improve, get medical help.

Air quality and outdoor activity

Self-assessing air quality during smoky conditions

A good way to estimate smoke levels and whether they may affect your health is to look at landmarks. They become harder to see when there's smoke in the air.

1. When there is no fire or smoke in the area, estimate the distance from you to various landmarks that you can see from your service or school. Keep a record of these.
2. When there is smoke in the area, use the estimated distances to the landmarks, along with the table below, to help identify the air quality category. For example, if you can't clearly see a building more than 5–10km away, the air quality could be poor.
3. Take any precautions, using the table on page 2 as a guide.

Air quality category	Visibility
Good	More than 20 km
Moderate	10–20 km
Poor	5–10 km
Very poor	1.5–5 km
Hazardous	0.5–1.5 km

Taking breaks and doing less intense activities

Students and children should take breaks and do less intense activities when air quality is unhealthy.

Students and children breathe harder when they are active for a longer period or when they do more intense activities. More pollution enters the lungs when a person is breathing harder.

It helps to:

- reduce the amount of time students and children are breathing hard (e.g. take breaks; rotate players frequently)
- reduce the intensity of activities so students and children are not breathing so hard (e.g. walk instead of run).

Decision to relocate or close schools

Any decision or advice to relocate or close schools and early childhood centres will be made by

- Department of Education and Training
- the Chief Health Officer
- State Response Controller, and
- other emergency management agencies

to ensure alignment with cautionary health advice/action across community.

If you can see or smell smoke within your classroom or service, it's important to use your own judgement. Relocate if you feel necessary.

Stay informed

Be prepared and make sure you're connected to emergency sources:

- visit the EMV website for all incidents and warnings advice <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/>
- tune in to ABC local radio, commercial and designated radio stations
- download the VicEmergency app – allow push notifications for warnings
- save the VicEmergency Hotline 1800 226 226 into your phone contacts
- connect with VicEmergency or MFB Twitter and Facebook accounts.