



**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):
Protect yourself in an extreme weather event during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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The following FAQ was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) and will be posted at www.sfdcp.org/covid19.

AUDIENCE: The general public in San Francisco.

Fully vaccinated people can review The Center for Disease Control ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov)) and the California Department of Public Health's ([CDPH](https://www.cdph.ca)) guidance for fully vaccinated people.

BACKGROUND: COVID-19 is transmitted more easily indoors than outdoors, but when the San Francisco Bay Area is impacted by wildfires and extreme heat, people may be advised to go indoors to protect against health effects from smoke, ash, or heat. This FAQ describes some steps you should consider when there is wildfire smoke and/or extreme heat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SFDPH's Core Guidance for COVID-19 can be found at [sfdph.org/dph/covid-19/core-guidance.asp](https://www.sfdph.org/dph/covid-19/core-guidance.asp). This is a summary of core guidance about COVID-19, how it is spread, and how to prevent it, including concise information about vaccination, contact tracing, and ventilation. This document will continue to be updated even after many SFDPH documents are retired.

VACCINES: [COVID-19 vaccines](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines) are effective at protecting you from getting sick even after you have had COVID-19. Vaccination is an important tool to help us get back to normal.

Extreme Heat

Extreme heat can be dangerous, particularly for older adults. Exposure to extreme heat can cause general fatigue, worsening of underlying health conditions, and/or lead to life-threatening heat stroke. People who live in San Francisco may be at higher risk from extreme heat because San Francisco is typically cool, and people have not had a chance to adapt to higher temperatures. Additionally, many people in San Francisco do not have access to air conditioning in their homes.

To protect yourself from extreme heat, follow the guidance at [sf72.org](https://www.sf72.org). Visiting a cooling site is an important option.

How can I keep myself safer from COVID-19 when visiting a cooling site?

- Get vaccinated for COVID-19
- Follow all requirements and recommendations regarding wearing face coverings in the cooling site and while taking public or shared transportation.
- Unvaccinated individuals should stay 6 feet apart from people outside your household.
- Visit a site with a fully functioning HVAC.



Can I visit the cooling site if I am positive for COVID-19?

No. If you are Isolating due to COVID-19 and experience illness due to heat, please seek medical attention. If you do not have a place to safely Isolate you may be able to ask a medical provider for a referral to an Isolation and Quarantine Hotel.

Wildfire

Smoke and ash from wildfires can irritate your eyes, nose, throat, and lungs, and increase your chances of developing a respiratory infection such as pneumonia. Wildfire smoke may also worsen illness from COVID-19.

Why is staying indoors an effective way to protect myself from wildfire smoke during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The most effective way to protect yourself from wildfire smoke is to stay indoors or limit your time outdoors when there is smoke in the air. This is especially important if you have heart or lung disease or are at higher risk for adverse health effects. Staying at home also reduces your exposure to COVID-19.

How can I make my indoor space safer to prevent risk of COVID-19?

You can [create a cleaner air space](#) at home by closing all windows and doors and running fans or air conditioning with a new filter on recirculate to prevent outside air from coming inside. If you have one, use a portable air cleaner to filter the air in the rooms you occupy most. To keep the indoor air clean, avoid activities such as burning candles, using gas stoves, and vacuuming.

How do I know if I should wear a mask outdoors during a wildfire event?

You can monitor the air quality at www.airnow.gov and follow the guidelines in the [table](#) (page 4) from the [California Air Resources Board](#).

Will my cloth or fabric face coverings protect me from wildfire smoke?

Cloth or fabric face coverings are useful to prevent transmission of COVID-19 because they block the large particles or droplets that may carry coronavirus. These types of face coverings do not filter out the tiny particles that cause respiratory problems during wildfire events. If you have an N95 or P100 respirator (mask) available, consider wearing it when you go outside. Respirators can filter out small airborne particles produced from fires.

I thought we weren't supposed to use N95 respirators because there was a shortage. Are N95s now available?

There is no longer a shortage of N95 respirators in the United States. Respirators can be found online, or in hardware, home repair, or drugstores. People with heart or lung problems should check with their healthcare provider before using a respirator because the respirator can make it more difficult to breathe. Respirators are not designed to fit children.

How do I use a respirator if I have one?

Some tips for wearing an N95/P100 respirator can be found [here](#). Follow the mask manufacturer's instructions. Try to seal the mask closely to your face. As a good seal is not possible with facial hair,



make sure the skin is clean shaven where the respirator touches the face. Throw away your respirator when it gets harder to breathe through or if it gets dirty.

If you have difficulty breathing, get dizzy, or have other symptoms while wearing a respirator, go to a place with cleaner air and remove it. Wearing a respirator, especially if it's hot or you are physically active, can increase the risk of heat-related illness. Take breaks often and drink water.

Can I wear an N95 respirator with a one-way valve?

Masks with one-way valves (often a raised plastic disk about the size of a quarter, on the front or side of the mask) do not protect others from COVID-19, as they can expose other people nearby to air you exhale. If masks are recommended or required for COVID-19 prevention (such as in transit or healthcare facilities, or if you are unvaccinated), you can wear a cloth face covering or simple face mask over a respirator with a valve.

Do KN95 masks protect against wildfire smoke?

KN95 masks that have been approved by National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) are equivalent to N95s. On July 6, 2021, the [FDA revoked the Emergency Use Authorization of non-NIOSH of non-NIOSH approved respirators because the supply of NIOSH approved respirators had recovered in the U.S.](#)

How can I keep myself safer from COVID-19 when visiting a cleaner air site?

- Get vaccinated for COVID-19
- Follow the current health order regarding wearing face coverings.
- Unvaccinated individuals should stay 6 feet apart from people outside your household.
- Visit a site with a fully functioning HVAC.



Air Quality Index and Actions You Can Take to Protect Yourself

Air Quality Index (AQI)		Who Needs to be Concerned?	What Should I do?
0-50	Good	It's a great day to be active outside	
51-100	Moderate	Some people who may be unusually sensitive to particulate pollution.	<p>Unusually sensitive people: <i>Consider reducing prolonged or heavy exertion. Watch for symptoms such as coughing or shortness of breath. These are signs to take it easier.</i></p> <p>Everyone else: It's a good day to be active outside.</p>
101-150	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	Sensitive groups include people with heart or lung disease, older adults, children and teenagers.	<p>Sensitive groups: <i>Reduce prolonged or heavy exertion. It's OK to be active outside, but take more breaks and do less intense activities. Watch for symptoms such as coughing or shortness of breath.</i></p> <p>People with asthma should follow their asthma action plans and keep quick relief medicine handy.</p> <p>If you have heart disease: Symptoms such as palpitations, shortness of breath, or unusual fatigue may indicate a serious problem. If you have any of these, contact your health care provider.</p>
151-200	Unhealthy	Everyone	<p>Sensitive groups: <i>Avoid prolonged or heavy exertion. Consider moving activities indoors or rescheduling.</i></p> <p>Everyone else: <i>Reduce prolonged or heavy exertion. Take more breaks during outdoor activities.</i></p>
201-300	Very Unhealthy	Everyone	<p>Sensitive groups: <i>Avoid all physical activity outdoors. Move activities indoors or reschedule to a time when air quality is better.</i></p> <p>Everyone else: <i>Avoid prolonged or heavy exertion. Consider moving activities indoors or rescheduling to a time when air quality is better.</i></p>
301-500	Hazardous	Everyone	<p>Everyone: <i>Avoid all physical activity outdoors.</i></p> <p>Sensitive groups: <i>Remain indoors and keep activity levels low. Follow tips for keeping particle levels low indoors.</i></p> <p>Workplaces: <i>May consider closing if not essential to public health.</i></p>



Resources

San Francisco

- www.sfcddcp.org/covid19
- <https://www.sfcddcp.org/COVID-Ventilation>
- Sf72.org

Centers for Disease Control

- [Operating schools during COVID-19: CDC's Considerations](#)
- [Wildfire Smoke and COVID-19: Frequently Asked Questions and Resources for Air Resource Advisors and Other Environmental Health Professionals](#)
- [Natural Disasters, Severe Weather, and COVID-19](#)

AIHA (formerly the American Industrial Hygiene Association)

- [Reducing the Risk of COVID-19 Using Engineering Controls](#)

American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE)

- [ASHRAE Resources Available to Address COVID-19 Concerns](#)
- [ASHRAE Reopening Schools and Universities C19 Guidance](#)
- [Standard 62.1-2019 Ventilation for Acceptable Indoor Air Quality](#)
(note – this is a for-fee document. ASHRAE provides free web-access to a read-only version from the linked web page; look for Standard 62.1-2019)

Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers

- [Directory of Certified Portable Air Cleaners](#)
- [Information Regarding Portable Air Cleaner Testing](#)

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

- [Ventilation and COVID-19](#)
- [Indoor Air in Homes and COVID-19](#)

Harvard University School of Public Health and University Colorado, Boulder School of Engineering

- [Harvard-CU Boulder Portable Air Cleaner Calculator for Schools](#)

World Health Organization (WHO)

- [Roadmap to improve and ensure good indoor ventilation in the context of COVID-19](#)