

Air Quality Issue Q's & A's – June 2023

Q. What should I do if I smell smoke in my office on campus when air quality is poor due to wildfire smoke?

A. Outdoor air, including wildfire smoke, can enter campus buildings through open windows/doors, mechanical ventilation, and through small openings, joints, or cracks. If you smell smoke indoors, please contact the Customer Service Team at clerks@mcmaster.ca or ext. 24740, to ensure systems are functioning properly.

Q. I have a hybrid work arrangement. Can I work remotely until the air quality due to wildfire smoke improves?

A. When the air quality is poor due to wildfire smoke, our Facilities team is monitoring the air quality in buildings on campus and are making adjustments to reduce the circulation of outdoor air and instead re-circulate air within buildings, where appropriate. At a minimum, McMaster has installed high standard air filters (called MERV-13 air filters) in all buildings where air is recirculated to ensure high air quality within our buildings.

A MERV-13 filter has a higher capture efficiency than a normal filter and can help remove finer particles from the air that recirculates through the system. These steps, which were introduced in response to COVID-19, are effective at improving the air quality in our buildings at this time. In addition, stand-alone HEPA filter units are still maintained all over campus. They also help improve air quality within a space by capturing particulates within the space.

With that, where it is operationally feasible, employees concerned about their health and well-being during this air quality issue may discuss a temporary increase to remote work with their manager. If approved, managers and employees are encouraged to maintain open communication as to the appropriate time to resume their regular hybrid work schedule.

Q. What is the status of the HEPA filters around campus?

A. Stand-alone HEPA filters are still maintained all over campus. When turned on, they can help improve poor air quality due to wildfire smoke within a space by capturing particulates within that space.

Q. I am considered high risk due to my health status. Is it safe for me to be at work during times when air quality is poor due to wildfire smoke?

A. Please refer to the public health guidelines if available and consult with your health care provider if you have specific concerns about your risk. The University is happy to discuss accommodations as necessary to help you be in the workplace and also to make arrangements for alternative work locations if required.

Q. I'm feeling anxious and scared about the wildfires and the impact on my family. What resources are available?

A. It's not unusual to feel anxious, stressed out, sad or isolated during a smoke event. Review these resources to help you protect your mental health or reach out for help during a smoke event.

- 10 Tips for coping with wildfire smoke, from a public health expert: <https://beyond.ubc.ca/wildfire-smoke/>
- Top tips for parents in dealing with worry around wildfires: <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/qa-how-to-deal-with-wildfire-anxiety>
- Coping with wildfires and climate change crises: <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/wildfires>

Employees and their family members with Extended Health Care benefits can access free mental health supports through Telus Health:

- Toll Free: 1.833.366.4544
- **Visit:** [Telus Health Virtual Platform](#)
- **Download:** LifeWorks Mobile App

Anyone can access free mental health supports through the following resources:

- [Wellness Together Canada](#)
- PocketWell app
 - [download from the App store](#)
 - [download from Google Play](#)
- [Kids Help Phone](#)
- [Hope for Wellness Helpline for Indigenous Peoples](#)
- [Taking care of your mental health](#)

Wildfire Smoke and Your Health

The best way to protect your health is to reduce exposure to wildfire smoke. These resources may offer some additional information and tips on protecting yourself during a smoke event.

[Government of Canada – Wildfire Smoke, air quality, and your health](#)

<https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/air-quality-health-index/wildfire-smoke.html#toc5>

BC CDC Fact Sheet on Health Effects of Wildfire Smoke

http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Guidelines%20and%20Forms/Guidelines%20and%20Manuals/Health-Environment/BCCDC_WildFire_FactSheet_HealthEffects.pdf

BC CDC Face Masks for Wildfire Smoke

http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Guidelines%20and%20Forms/Guidelines%20and%20Manuals/Health-Environment/BCCDC_WildFire_FactSheet_FaceMasks.pdf