

‘It's like we're living on Mars’: Air pollution chokes Bay Area skies, increasing COVID-19 concerns

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Haze and smoke surround the East Bay on Sunday, Aug. 23, 2020 in San Francisco, California. The fires in Northern California have made the air quality bad in the Bay Area.
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

Air quality across the Bay Area hovered at unhealthy levels Monday, as raging wildfires pumped hazardous smoke into the skies and increased the dangers associated with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

[The worst places to breathe](#) Monday were spread across the region, including San Pablo, Concord, Redwood City, East Oakland, Pleasanton, Napa and Vallejo, all of which reported dangerous levels of PM2.5, the particulate matter found in wildfire smoke, according to the [Bay Area Air Quality Management District](#).

Some doctors near fire zones reported an uptick in patients with respiratory issues over the weekend, while others expect to see more in the coming weeks.

The worsening air conditions come at a time when health experts warn that smoke, colliding with COVID-19, will make it even harder for people with chronic conditions such as asthma or lung disease to breathe. Those exacerbated conditions could make those infected with the virus even sicker.

“We’re very concerned that now we have two major public health crises converging at the same time,” said Dr. Ronn Berrol, the medical director of the emergency department at Sutter Health’s Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland.

Historic blazes have worsened air quality across the Bay Area, with no end in sight as fires remain mostly uncontained. On Sunday, Livermore and Pleasanton [reached hazardous levels of pollution](#), the worst rating according to the [Bay Area Air Quality Management District](#). The air improved slightly Monday, but unhealthy levels of PM2.5 were still reported across the Bay Area, particularly in the North Bay, East Bay and parts of the Peninsula. In San Francisco, West Oakland, and Berkeley, the air was unhealthy for sensitive groups.

National Weather Service meteorologist David King said Monday that winds could decrease smoke and haze around the San Francisco peninsula, but given the size of the LNU and SCU lightning complex fires, the Central Valley and areas farther east will likely still be very smoky. King did not estimate when Bay Area skies would clear up.

While there’s little evidence yet to show that smoke makes you more susceptible to the coronavirus, there’s mounting proof that it could make you more seriously sick if infected, and studies have shown that chronic pollution can increase the likelihood of dying from COVID-19. Doctors also feared that pollution could cause coughing, which spreads the virus.

Hospitals in Oakland and the North Bay, bordering some of the largest fires in California’s history, hadn’t noticed more patients coming in with respiratory issues by Monday. But doctors pointed out that in past fires, more patients showed up at least a week and sometimes months after fires started, with trouble breathing, heart palpitations or even heart attacks.

In east San Jose, where the SCU fire has been burning just a few miles away, Regional Medical Center has seen an increase in respiratory patients since Friday, Dr. Paul Silka, head of the emergency department, said Monday. The smoke compounds risks for people with COVID-19, he said.

“I am anticipating these people will have a more rapid decline,” Silka said. Last week, the hospital sent home a patient with mild COVID-19 symptoms only to have them return two days later in much worse condition.

Regional Medical Center has beefed up its resources to care for these patients, getting more medication, ventilators and personal protective equipment, and will be testing everyone with respiratory symptoms for the coronavirus. Silka urged anyone with trouble breathing or pain in their chest to not wait to come to the hospital until it was too late.

Dr. Bruce Deas, director of the emergency department at Healdsburg District Hospital, which is prepared to evacuate as the LNU fire burns west of town, expressed the same concern as bad air quality and public health warnings keep people home.

“We have seen over the last few months, especially in the last month, patients who had COVID-19 and stayed home and got very sick,” Deas said. “Obviously it’s better for them to be in the hospital.”

For some Bay Area residents already at risk, air quality may push them out of the area entirely. Smoke from the CZU Lightning Complex fires consuming the Santa Cruz Mountains was so bad overnight in the Los Gatos hills that Nick Weidner, 64, had to wake up several times to use an inhaler to manage his asthma.

“Breathing is difficult. Eyes burning and irritated,” he said in a message Monday morning. He has a history of lung disease and hasn’t left home in months to protect himself from the coronavirus. The weather forecast promised to push smoke away from his home by the evening, but if it changed, he and his spouse planned to leave for Humboldt County to escape the dangerous air.

As of Monday, the first major wildfires since the coronavirus pandemic began had been burning for a week with no relief in sight.

“The longer this goes on, the more we would be concerned about the effects of the wildfire smoke on COVID-19,” said Dr. John Balmes, a professor of medicine at UCSF and environmental health sciences at UC Berkeley. “The combination of what we know about air pollution and chronic exposures makes us worried about the confluence of the current bad air quality from wildfire smoke and risks for exacerbation and progression of the disease.”

Experts urge residents to stay inside, seal windows and doors, get air filters or set your central ventilation system to recirculate, and wear a mask outside (an N95 is most effective). But some workers need to go outside, where they face greater risks.

Jay Alfonso, a steelworker in Pittsburg, makes sure to wear a mask when going to work in the mill, but is worried about the long-term health effects of breathing in the smoke.

“It burns, it dries my eyes out and it’s burdensome on our throats,” Alfonso said. “I don’t know if this is going to create any future problems.”

“There's just no getting away from the smell. When you look at the sky, everything is just so hazy and you see a constant red sun in the sky. It's almost like we're living on Mars,” Alfonso added. “I've never seen fires like this in all my years of being here, at least this close to home.”

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