

Australian Medical Association Limited
ABN 37 008 426 793

42 Macquarie Street, Barton ACT 2600: PO Box 6090, Kingston ACT 2604
 Telephone: (02) 6270 5400 Facsimile (02) 6270 5499
 Website : <http://www.ama.com.au/>



AMA WARNS OF NEW HEALTH THREATS FROM ONGOING NATIONAL BUSHFIRE CRISIS

The AMA is today warning of new health threats for people affected by the escalating bushfire crisis around the country.

Against a backdrop of declarations of a State of Emergency in NSW and a State of Disaster in Victoria – ahead of what experts predict will be a heightened fire risk in many areas this weekend – the AMA is highlighting the need for extra precautions to prevent additional health risks and illnesses further affecting those directly impacted by fires, as well as those breathing hazardous smoke beyond the current fire zones.

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said that the Emergency and Disaster Declarations in NSW and Victoria, and the ongoing dangerous situations in Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, and Western Australia, bring with them new health risks of compounded exposure to smoke, heat, fatigue, and stress.

“Lives are being lost, quality of health is being compromised for thousands of people, and property and homes and communities are being destroyed,” Dr Bartone said.

“As heightened alerts and warnings come into effect nationally, the AMA urges everybody in and near fire zones to be aware of the risks of compounded ongoing smoke exposure, and to seek medical care where needed.

“The length and density of smoke exposure is a new and possibly fatal health risk that many people within our community have not previously had to face.

“With denser smoke haze and longer periods that people endure smoke inhalation, there is a much higher risk that previously healthy people will face developing serious illness.

“The AMA encourages people in fire zones to check on neighbours and loved ones and give support whenever possible, and to provide initial and ongoing support to evacuees and those who suffer loss of property.

“The mental health burden of this disaster on our communities will be considerable.

“Doctors remain on duty across the country to help people affected by bushfires in the short term and in the weeks and months ahead to treat the health consequences of this national disaster.

“The AMA commends the incredible efforts of firefighters, emergency workers, police, volunteers, charities, and countless community members working around the clock to protect life and property,” Dr Bartone said.

AMA Vice President and respiratory physician, Dr Chris Zappala, said a small group of people have respiratory disease they are not aware of.

“Being undiagnosed and unmedicated is a new risk for some people who, but for fire and smoke exposure, appear otherwise healthy,” Dr Zappala said.

“Anyone who develops breathlessness, wheeziness, chest tightness, or a persistent cough should seek medical attention immediately. Borrowing someone else's inhaler or using over-the-counter Ventolin is not recommended.

“People with known chronic respiratory illness such as asthma are also at increased risk of exacerbation.

“These patients should increase inhaler therapy as prescribed, and reduce smoke exposure where possible. Anyone with concerns about their personal health should immediately seek medical advice,” Dr Zappala said.

Background:

For people preparing for worsening fire conditions, the AMA recommends knowing:

- what medications they should have with them at all times;
- the location of nearest available pharmacies;
- what local medical resources can be accessed;
- what precautions are needed, such as appropriate and recommended face masks; and
- where primary care services can be accessed;

In response to the poor air quality in the ACT in recent days, ACT Health has offered the following advice, which is relevant for all fire-affected communities:

- People who are sensitive to smoke, especially those with pre-existing heart and lung conditions, should take extra care during these conditions.
- This includes remaining indoors where possible, with windows and doors closed, and not using evaporative air conditioners which draw air into the house from outside.
- Anyone with a heart or lung condition should take their medication as prescribed by their doctor. People with asthma should follow their asthma action plan.
- Anyone experiencing wheezing, chest tightness, or difficulty breathing should seek urgent medical attention, and in the event of a medical emergency call triple-zero (000).
- People who can be more vulnerable to smoke and air pollution include:
 - people with heart or lung conditions (including asthma)
 - children aged less than 14 years
 - pregnant women, and
 - people over 65 years of age.
- Ordinary paper masks are not effective at filtering smoke, but do not cause any harm if people choose to wear them and they feel they get some benefit.
- Evidence shows P2 and N95 masks do filter some smoke and are most commonly used in occupational settings where exposure to airborne particles occur on a regular basis. However, they cannot completely eliminate exposure to smoke, and as they can be difficult to fit and use appropriately, they are not recommended for use in the general community as an alternative to avoiding outdoor exposure.

3 January 2020

CONTACT: John Flannery 02 6270 5477 / 0419 494 761
 Maria Hawthorne 02 6270 5478 / 0427 209 753