

Do wildfires put Californians at higher risk for lung cancer?

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In California and across the country, more people are likely to die from lung cancer than any other cancer, the American Lung Association states in an August press release, as wildfire season is in full swing.

The organization estimated that more than 17,000 people in California will be diagnosed with lung cancer in 2022 and more than 9,600 will die

from the disease.

It added that most people are not concerned about getting lung cancer. According to a survey, only 40% of Americans are worried that they may get the disease.

Generally, lung cancer can be caused by smoking tobacco, genetics, [second hand smoke](#), radon and [asbestos exposure](#) and [air pollution](#), according to the American Cancer Society.

Dr. Albert Rizzo, the American Lung Association's chief medical officer, explains the state of lung cancer in California:

Are lung cancer and wildfire smoke related?

It's not clear yet if wildfires are directly related to California's lung cancer rate, said Rizzo, who is also a pulmonary physician in Delaware.

But certainly, wildfire smoke is known to contribute to [poor air quality](#) and air pollution with particle matter, Rizzo said.

Wildfires increases the amount of PM 2.5—fine inhalable particles—in the lungs, he said, and is known for causing lung cancer, asthma, [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease](#) and increasing the risk of problems for people with chronic lung disease.

A recent study from McGill University in Canada found that people who've been exposed to wildfires have a higher chance of lung cancer and brain tumors.

According to the study, those that live near the site of wildfires, within about 31 miles , for more than 10 years have a 10% higher chance of brain tumors and 4.9% higher chance of lung cancer, compared to

people living further from these areas.

How to protect your lungs during wildfire season

Wildfire smoke can travel hundred and thousands of miles, Rizzo said, so stay updated with your local air quality report.

You can use the U.S. Air Quality Index to check air quality data using your ZIP code online.

If you're not under an evacuation order during a wildfire, stay indoors and try to protect the air in your home by keeping the doors, windows and fireplace dampers shut, he said.

Other ways you can protect yourself, Rizzo said, include:

- Use the [air conditioner](#) to circulate clean air in the home
- Keep your windows up if you're driving in a car
- Monitor your symptoms and call your physician if needed. Signs that you're having trouble with [oxygen levels](#) due to wildfire exposure include burning eyes, coughing, shortness of breath and lightheadedness.

You should also be cautious with [younger children](#), he said, because they're more susceptible to the smoke since their lungs are smaller.

Signs of lung cancer

According to the cancer association, most lung cancers don't show symptoms until it's spread, but some individuals with early lung cancer may have symptoms.

Some signs include: persistent or worsening cough, coughing up blood or rust-colored phlegm, [chest pain](#), [weight loss](#), tiredness and infections, such as bronchitis or pneumonia, that keep reappearing.

The cancer society states that if you see your doctor when you first notice symptoms, you might be able to get your cancer diagnosed early, which will allow for more effective treatment.

Rizzo recommended people who are at a higher risk of lung cancer—50 to 80 years old, heavy smokers and still smoking within the last 15 years—get screened for a low dose CAT scan. He said these scans can find [lung cancer](#) before it causes any symptoms.

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