

# Climate Change and Health: Wildfires

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Climate change is real and is caused primarily by human activity, especially burning fossil fuels. As ocean and air temperatures rise, the delicate balance of climate, weather events and life is disrupted. Human health suffers as a result. What is truly needed for health is a cool, stable climate.



## Wildfires and Your Health

Widespread fires have a major impact on human health and life.

- Air pollution particles in smoke and ash can cause coughing, irritated throat and sinuses, shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, and stinging eyes.
- Smoke worsens respiratory conditions such as allergies, asthma, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.
- Inhalation of carbon monoxide can aggravate angina.
- Chronic health effects include increases in cardiovascular disease and mortality in

populations living in areas with higher fine particulate air pollution.

- Burns and death. Those who do not evacuate safely and firefighters are at risk of being burned or killed by wildfires. The 2013 wildfire in Arizona killed 19 firefighters.
- Damage to homes affects people's physical and mental health. It also impacts access to medical care.

## How to Protect Yourself & Others

- If a wildfire occurs in your area, avoid outdoor activities. People with respiratory problems and chronic heart problems should consult with their doctor about taking extra precautions.
- If you must go outdoors in a smoky area, breathe through a damp cloth. While driving in smoky areas, keep windows and vents closed.
- Know evacuation routes. Listen to evacuation and safety advice if a wildfire occurs.
- Be responsible with fire:
  - Be cautious disposing cigarettes.
  - Only build fires in designated areas and during permitted times. Do not leave campfires unattended. Extinguish them thoroughly.
  - Use spark arrestors on off-road vehicles.
- Make sure trees and woody vegetation are a safe distance from your home. Stick to drought-resistant plants in your yard.

## Climate Change Spurs Wildfires

Wildfires are uncontrollable and unpredictable fires in natural landscapes. The frequency of large wildfires and the area they burn has been increasing, especially in the western United States. Climate change is major contributor to this increase, for a number of reasons.

### Warmer Temperatures

Average global temperatures have increased by 1.2°C over the past century, primarily because of increasing heat-trapping greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide.

As global temperatures rise, fire seasons become longer as warmer temperatures begin earlier and extend into the fall.



### Insects

Higher temperatures allow for a longer lifecycle for beetles and other insects that eat trees. Dry conditions also weaken trees and make it easier for these insects to damage them further, resulting in dead and highly combustible plants.

### Drier Conditions

Snow packs are now melting up to four weeks earlier than they did 50 years ago, due to warmer temperatures. The water these snow packs supply soaks into the soil and then evaporates earlier than it would have years ago. As the season progresses, forests and grasses have less summer water source,

making them more prone to drought, and ultimately, wildfires.

In addition, areas in the Western United States that already naturally experience fires, are experiencing decreased precipitation. In recent years, this region has been experiencing drought conditions, drying out vegetation -- and dry plant matter burns at higher temperatures. Combined with large quantities of fuel, this can lead to catastrophic fires.

## Take action to reduce climate change

To protect our world from the health effects of climate change, we must take steps that restore the climate. This includes switching from fossil fuels to safe clean renewable energy sources like sun, water and wind. Planning future growth to ensure efficient, convenient mass transit. Where conditions permit, walking and bicycling more. We'll all live better on a cool, green, healthy planet!

To learn more about what you can do, see PSR's website: [www.psr.org/environment-and-health](http://www.psr.org/environment-and-health)

### Get involved!

Anyone can become a member of Physicians for Social Responsibility. If you share our goal of protecting our health from climate change, please join today! Visit us at [www.PSR.org](http://www.PSR.org)

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