



Prescribed Fire and Lung Health: What You Need to Know

Catastrophic wildfires are harming lung health

Wildfire smoke is a serious threat to lung health, and can even be deadly. Climate change is fueling more frequent and severe wildfires, producing smoke that can harm the health of people thousands of miles away.

Breathing wildfire smoke is unhealthy for anyone, but some are more vulnerable, including those with lung or heart disease, older adults, children under 18, pregnant people and outdoor workers.

Wildfire smoke can cause asthma attacks, heart attacks and stroke, and even premature death. Pregnant people exposed to wildfire smoke are more likely to experience adverse birth outcomes like preterm birth.



When it comes to addressing worsening wildfires, taking action on climate change by cutting greenhouse gas pollution is essential. But more needs to be done to mitigate wildfire smoke and protect public health today.

What is prescribed fire?

Prescribed fire is the planned burning of certain areas vulnerable to wildfires to reduce combustible content such as plant matter and other forest debris that could burn during wildfires and potentially escalate the fire. They are sometimes also called prescribed burns or controlled burns. Prescribed fire can help reduce the risk of large-scale, catastrophic wildfires.

To conduct a prescribed burn, experts often plan for months or even years. Experienced teams take careful precautions to both minimize smoke and ensure the fire remains controlled. Prescribed burns are implemented under planned, predictable circumstances in accordance with applicable regulations and laws, including national safety standards. To reduce harmful exposure from smoke, prescribed burns should be conducted when meteorological conditions are favorable and wind patterns allow smoke to move away from sensitive areas (e.g., populated areas, hospitals, schools, roadways).

Why does the Lung Association care about prescribed fire?

The Lung Association has a long history of addressing the public health threat of wildfires, from providing lung health resources to people living with wildfire smoke to advocating for measures to address climate change. The unfortunate reality is that devastating, catastrophic wildfires are happening now, creating lung health emergencies.

A [research review](#) led by the Lung Association found that prescribed fire can be used as an important tool to reduce the overall harm to lung health from catastrophic wildfires.



How can prescribed fire help protect lung health?

For decades, U.S. policy was to put out wildfires and avoid prescribed burns. However, our research review found this approach is not working to prevent catastrophic wildfires as it has been shown to merely postpone, rather than reduce, the air quality and health burdens associated with wildfire smoke.

Careful implementation of prescribed fire can be used to reduce the risk of large-scale, catastrophic wildfires, as well as the associated negative air quality, health and safety impacts.

What does the American Lung Association support?

The American Lung Association supports prescribed fires under certain conditions as a tool to mitigate wildfire risk. Prescribed fires should only be implemented in appropriate ecosystems under planned, predictable circumstances to limit harmful smoke exposure.

The Lung Association also supports measures to reduce negative public health impacts associated with wildfire smoke and prescribed burn activities including:

- Increased air quality monitoring and surveillance coupled with public outreach and public notification systems.
- Equipping the public with indoor air filtration and clean air spaces, especially for high-risk individuals.
- Providing and encouraging the use of respiratory protective equipment designed to protect against wildfire smoke.
- Support for additional emergency planning and response, including protections for vulnerable populations.

Additionally, the Lung Association supports funding for public health protections during prescribed fire or wildfire smoke events as well as additional research into the health impacts of wildfires and prescribed burns.

Learn more about [prescribed burns](#) and ways to protect lung health.

What is NOT considered prescribed fire?

Prescribed fire to mitigate catastrophic wildfires isn't the only time people burn intentionally. By "prescribed fire," the Lung Association is not referring to the use of thinned biomass for energy production or other forms of prescribed fire used for purposes other than fire management (e.g. agricultural burning).