



Air pollution

What is air pollution and how to protect your family from it.

Air pollution is one of the greatest threats to children's health. Ninety-nine per cent of people in the world live in places where the air is considered unhealthy. When children breathe toxic air, it harms their health and jeopardizes their future.

For children to grow up healthy, they need clean, safe air. your environment and help protect your child from its impacts.

Children and air pollution

Why are children more at risk?

As children are growing, their developing lungs and brains makes them especially vulnerable to air pollution.

Their immune systems are weaker than adults, making them more vulnerable to viruses, bacteria and other infections. This increases the risk of respiratory infection and reduces their ability to fight it.

Young children breathe faster than adults and take in more air relative to their body weight, often through the mouth, which takes in more pollutants. They are also closer to the ground, where some pollutants reach peak concentrations.

How does air pollution impact children?

Air pollution causes both immediate and long-term health effects in children that can be irreversible.

Air pollution is linked to respiratory conditions such as pneumonia, bronchitis and asthma. It can exacerbate underlying health conditions and harm children's physical and cognitive development. As a result, other areas of children's lives can be affected. For example, when children get sick, they might miss school, further limiting their learning and development potential.

And the effects of air pollution can last a lifetime. Adults who were exposed to air pollution as children tend to have respiratory problems later in life.

During pregnancy: A woman's body can store harmful chemicals from the air, passing them to her baby during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Air pollution can seriously affect the health of the foetus. It can lead to negative pregnancy outcomes – such as miscarriages, early delivery and low birth weight – and can impact the healthy development of children's brains.

What symptoms of exposure to air pollution should I look out for?

Here are some symptoms that can result from exposure to air pollution. Talk to your doctor if a member of your family experience any of these symptoms.

- Dry/irritated eyes, headache, fatigue, allergies or shortness of breath. In infants, look out for signs of exertion while breathing.
- People with asthma might experience more severe asthmatic attacks, shortness of breath, chest pain, coughing or wheezing.

How to protect children from air pollution

Air pollution is a global problem and requires action not just by families and individuals, but by communities and governments. However, there are many things we can do to reduce our exposure to air pollution and reduce its impact on children. Here are some key steps you can take with your family:

Protecting children from air pollution outdoors

- Monitor the air quality information where you live on a daily basis and try to adjust your family's behaviour and exposure levels accordingly.
- Try to reduce the time spent in areas where pollution is high, such as near or around areas of severe traffic congestion or sources of industrial pollution. Travelling at times of the day when air pollution is lower can help reduce exposure.

- When air pollution is particularly bad, it is best that children avoid strenuous activity. Play or exercise should be minimized, particularly if children have pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma or other respiratory infections.
- When air pollution outside is extreme, such as during wildfires, try to keep your child indoors.

Protecting children from air pollution indoors

- Use cleaner fuels and technologies to cook, heat and light your home. If possible, choose electricity, natural gas, liquefied petroleum gas, biogas or solar stoves or ovens.
- Ensure the cooking area is well-ventilated by opening windows and using exhaust fans to allow heat and fumes to escape. If it's hard to ventilate your kitchen, consider cooking outside if possible.
- Maintain stoves, chimneys and other appliances so that they burn fuel efficiently.
- Keep pregnant women and children away from smoke.
- Don't smoke indoors or near children or pregnant women to make sure they are not exposed to second-hand smoke.
- Be aware of other common sources of indoor contaminants, including building and paint products, cleaning supplies and household chemicals. Don't burn candles or incense or use air fresheners that add toxic chemicals to the air.

- If possible, consider installing air purifiers with high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters which are effective against indoor air pollution.
- Healthy diets and lifestyles can help reduce the overall impact of air pollution on children. The healthier a child is, the less likely that health complications arise as a result of exposure to air pollution. This includes exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life, making sure children stay up-to-date with their immunizations, supporting healthy diets and providing plenty of opportunities to play and be physically active.

And remember: Children are often passionate about the environment and combatting climate change is something that matters greatly to many. Children should know about the risks that air pollution can have to both their health and the environment. They should know how bad their air can be, and what can be done to reduce it and protect themselves from it. Here's a [child-friendly resource](#) about air pollution you can explore together.

Help create change for cleaner air

Air pollution is a public health emergency and unless governments and businesses take concrete steps to reduce it, children will continue to suffer the most. You can play an important role in raising awareness of the problem and the solutions.

- Encourage and support your children to learn about and participate in environmental activities. For example, they could join UNICEF's Voice's of Youth community and explore the Breathe Life 2030 global campaign for clean air.
- Use public transportation, biking, or simply walking to reduce your own carbon footprint and thereby air pollution.
- Talk to your child's school about clean air, pollution-free zones and safe playing areas. Find out if they have rules on traffic and smoking bans around the school.
- Look in your community for local green initiatives you can support.
- Call on your local government and health authorities to support policies that reduce air pollution and protect child health, such as strengthening public transport and limiting sources of air pollution near schools and playgrounds.

