

# Community Fact sheet

## Dust Storms and Health

Dust storms reduce air quality and visibility, and may have adverse effects on health.

This fact sheet outlines the health risks, and explains what you can do to avoid or reduce the impact of dust storms on your health.

### Introduction

Dust storms are common in parts of the world with dry land areas. Periods of severe and widespread drought can increase the likelihood of major dust storms.

Dust storms reduce air quality and visibility, and may have adverse effects on health, particularly for people who already have breathing-related problems.

### Dust and respiration

Dust particles vary in size from coarse to fine, to very fine. Particles in dust storms tend to be coarse and do not pose a serious health threat to the general public.

Coarse dust particles generally only reach as far as the inside of the nose, mouth or throat. However, some people with pre-existing breathing related problems, such as asthma and emphysema, may experience difficulties.

Smaller or fine particles can reach much deeper into the sensitive regions of the respiratory tract and lungs. These smaller dust particles have a greater potential to cause serious harm to your health.

### Exposure and health effects

The most common symptoms experienced during a dust storm are irritation to the eyes and upper airways, which may:

- trigger allergic reactions and asthma attacks
- cause serious breathing-related problems

People who may be more vulnerable than others are:

- infants, children and adolescents
- the elderly
- people with respiratory conditions, such as asthma, bronchitis and emphysema
- people with heart disease
- people with diabetes.

Prolonged exposure to airborne dust can lead to chronic breathing and lung problems, and possibly heart disease.

### Health precautions

The following precautions can help you protect yourself and minimise the adverse effects of a dust storm:

- Avoid outdoor activity. If you must go outside spend as little time outside as possible.
- Avoid vigorous exercise, especially if you have asthma, diabetes or a breathing-related condition.
- Stay indoors, with windows and doors closed.
- If you are an asthmatic or have a respiratory condition and you develop symptoms such as shortness of breath, coughing, wheezing, or chest pain, follow your prescribed treatment plan.

If symptoms do not settle, seek medical advice.

### Dust storms and safety

Visibility deteriorates very quickly during a dust storm. If you are on the road and your ability to drive safely is impaired by poor visibility, reduce your speed. Be prepared to pull off the road if visibility deteriorates to less than 100m.

If your car is air-conditioned, reduce the amount of dust entering your car by switching the air intake to 'recirculate'.

## What about wearing a facemask?

Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine particles from dust and therefore are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.

Special masks (called 'P1' or 'P2') are suitable to filter dust. They are available at most hardware stores and generally provide a greater degree of protection from inhaling fine particles.

However, before deciding to wear a mask you should consider the following:

- They can be hot and uncomfortable to wear
- If the seal around the face and mouth is poor (e.g. men with beards cannot get a good seal), the mask is much less effective
- The masks do not filter out gases such as carbon monoxide
- They can make it harder for you to breathe normally, so anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition should seek medical advice before using them, and
- It is often better to stay indoors, away from the dust unless you cannot avoid working outdoors.

## Dust storms and water tanks

To minimise the amount of dust entering your rainwater tank install a first-flush diverter.

Refer to 'Your private drinking water supply'

[http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/downloads/your\\_private\\_drinking\\_water\\_supply.pdf](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/downloads/your_private_drinking_water_supply.pdf)

## Further information

For further information and advice, contact the Environmental Health section of your local council or the Environmental Health Unit of the Department of Human Services on 1300 761 874

Information in this fact sheet has been sourced from NSWHealth

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