



## STATEMENT FROM THE ACTING CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER AND STATE AND TERRITORY CHIEF HEALTH OFFICERS: ADVICE ON THE USE OF MASKS FOR THOSE EXPOSED TO BUSHFIRE SMOKE

**P2 masks are not recommended for general community use.**

**The use of P2 masks should be limited to:**

- vulnerable people including those with significant health issues;
- people whose only option is to work outside; or
- people returning to their properties in burned areas.

**Those most at risk of significant health effects of smoke include:**

- people with existing heart or lung conditions, including angina, ischaemic heart disease, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (bronchitis and emphysema);
- people over 65 years of age as they are more likely to have heart or lung disease;
- children 14 years and younger;
- pregnant women; and
- people with diabetes.

P2 masks have limited utility for extended periods. Seek the advice of a medical practitioner before using a P2 mask if you have an existing heart or lung condition.

Wherever possible, people should avoid smoke by staying indoors with the windows and doors shut and avoiding vigorous exercise outdoors. P2 masks can help protect against smoke but will only do so if used properly.

### GENERAL POINTS

- Smoke contains gases and particles that are known to cause health effects. Fine particles in the smoke (called PM<sub>2.5</sub>) are of greatest health concern. These fine particles are 2.5 microns or less in width or less than one thirtieth the width of a strand of human hair. They reduce visibility in the air. When inhaled they can penetrate deep into people's lung and can be absorbed into the bloodstream.
- The effects of smoke and PM<sub>2.5</sub> vary from person to person. Some groups are more likely to experience serious health effects from smoke. Exposure, particularly to high levels over a prolonged period, can cause a variety of health problems.
- The most effective ways of reducing exposure to smoke are to:
  1. Minimise vigorous outdoor activity; and
  2. Spend more time indoors with doors and windows closed.
- Disposable P2 face masks (also known as respirators) are designed to filter out PM<sub>2.5</sub> particles.
- To be effective, a P2 mask must fit well. Achieving the air-tight seal required is not easy. Men need to be clean-shaven for the mask to be effective. A guide to fitting a P2 mask can be found here: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/factsheets/Pages/face-mask.aspx>
- Wearing a P2 mask can make it more difficult to breathe. Those with underlying heart or lung conditions should consult their doctor for advice before using a P2 mask.
- If the mask becomes damaged, soiled, moist or contaminated, it is best to refit and replace or remove it. On average, masks may need to be replaced three to four times per day depending on the level of physical activity and subsequent build-up of moisture. Wearing a P2 mask can increase the risk of heat-related illness.
- If you feel dizzy, faint or out of breath while wearing a P2 mask, remove it and go to a place with better air quality and seek medical attention.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Are all face masks the same?

No, there are many different types of face masks. Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine particles associated with bushfire smoke.

For protection from particulates, there are three classes of filters: P1, P2 and P3. P1 masks are ineffective in filtering out PM2.5.

### Will a P2 mask provide total protection?

No. P2 masks do not provide complete protection, especially if fitted improperly. They do not remove or protect against gases that may be contained in the smoke such as carbon monoxide.

### What are the benefits of wearing a P2 mask?

Fitted properly, a P2 mask can filter out some of the fine particles from smoke. Make sure the mask is fitted properly and a good seal has been achieved. The mask should be sealed over the bridge of the nose and mouth, and there should be no gaps between the mask and face. Men should be clean shaven to get a good seal.

### What are some of the problems with P2 masks?

P2 masks can be very hot and uncomfortable and can make it harder for you to breathe normally. If the mask is not fitted properly or becomes loaded up with particles from extended use, it will be even less effective. Children, in particular, may find it difficult or impractical to wear a face mask correctly. There are different sizes of masks available and children should not be fitted with an adult mask. If people are not able to tolerate wearing a mask, they should, if possible reduce exposure to the smoke and ash.

### What else can I do to protect myself from bushfire smoke?

Other measures are more effective than masks for reducing exposure to bushfire smoke. There are a number of different ways of minimising exposure on days with high air pollution:

- Stay indoors if you can, with windows and doors shut.
- Avoid use of evaporative cooling and seek further information from manufacturers as required.
- When in a car, keep windows closed and set air conditioning to recirculate air.
- Follow your medical plan and doctor's advice about medications and asthma management (including carrying reliever medication at all times).
- Avoid physical activity.

- Avoid indoor sources of air pollution including cigarettes, candles and incense sticks.
- Take advantage of periods of clean air to ventilate your home, as smoke can take some time to disperse unless the house is opened up.

### Who is most at risk from bushfire smoke?

Anyone can experience symptoms from smoke exposure, including cough and difficulty breathing. Available supplies of P2 masks should be allocated as a priority to those most at risk of significant health effects of smoke including:

- people with existing heart or lung conditions, including angina, ischaemic heart disease, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (bronchitis and emphysema);
- people over 65 years of age as they are more likely to have heart or lung disease;
- children 14 years and younger;
- pregnant women; and
- people with diabetes.

It is important to refer to any advice on P2 mask priority groups from your local health authority.

### Where can I get a P2 mask?

P2 masks are sold at hardware stores and other supply businesses. In the case of a shortage, the Australian Government is in close contact with local manufacturers and distributors of P2 masks and states and territories about availability.

### Other hazards where using a mask may be beneficial

Other hazardous materials to be aware of after a fire include:

- asbestos
- ashes, especially from burnt treated timbers (such as copper chrome arsenate or 'CCA')
- dust
- garden or farm chemicals
- LP gas cylinders
- medicines
- metal and other residues from burnt household appliances
- other general chemicals (for example, cleaning products).

Check with your local emergency services that it is safe to return to your property and health authorities about particular hazards that may have been identified in your area.