

Smoke Inhalation



Other than burns, smoke inhalation is the greatest threat posed by fires. Smoke can burn delicate airways and deprive your body of oxygen. It also contains poisonous gases that can badly damage your throat, lungs, heart, brain, and other organs. Inhaling even a little smoke may affect breathing. Exposure to large amounts can be fatal.

When to go to the emergency room (ER)

Smoke inhalation is a medical emergency. Call 911 and wait for help. Don't attempt to drive yourself or someone else to the hospital. Don't leave a victim alone. Symptoms of smoke inhalation can quickly become worse. They can include:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Hoarseness or noisy breathing
- Headache, nausea, or vomiting
- Changes in skin color, ranging from blue to "cherry red"
- Confusion, fainting, or seizures
- Death

What to expect in the ER

Heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure will be checked, and the affected person will be examined carefully. One or more of these tests may be done:

- A chest X-ray may help show damage to lungs.
- Pulse oximetry checks oxygen levels using a light probe attached to the finger.
- A carboxyhemoglobin test measures blood levels of carbon monoxide, a deadly gas found in smoke.
- A blood test may be used to measure cyanide. This is another deadly gas found in smoke from house, vehicle, and industrial fires.
- An electrocardiogram (ECG) detects heart problems.

Treatment

Treatment focuses on keeping airways open and providing oxygen. Oxygen may be given through a mask or a nasal cannula. This is a thin tube with two prongs that fit inside the nostrils. If the airways are swollen or you can't breathe on your own, the healthcare provider may place a breathing tube through the nose or mouth into the throat. If you have a severe case of smoke inhalation or carbon monoxide poisoning, you may be transferred to a hyperbaric oxygen center. There, you will be given oxygen in a special compression chamber. In severe cases, you may need treatment for other poisonous gases released by the fire, such as cyanide. You may be given IV (intravenous) antidotes for cyanide poisoning. If you were exposed to a lot of the gas, you will likely need to stay in the hospital for at least 24 hours.

If you're caught in a building with smoke

- Drop to your knees and crawl to the nearest exit. Because smoke rises, there is less smoke near the floor.
- Put your shoulder against a wall to guide you.

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