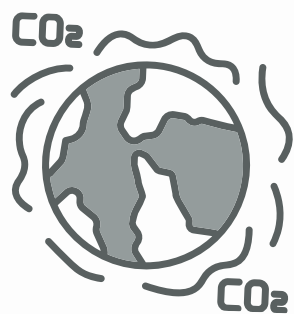




Maine Health Care Coalition: Downeast Chapter

Air Quality Guide 2026





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This guide was prepared for the Maine Health Care Coalition: Downeast Chapter in collaboration with the Downeast Public Health District. The production of this report was made possible through the collective efforts of individuals who contributed their time, expertise and insights.

Special thanks to

- ME-HCC Downeast Chapter Leadership: *Danielle Day and Alfred May*
- Hancock County EMA Director: *Andrew Sankey*

This guide was assembled by Alfred May, Downeast Chapter Vice Chair/District Liaison and Kawther Mohamed, Downeast Public Health Educator.



INTRODUCTION

Clean air is essential for healthy living, but almost 99% of the global population breathes air exceeding their guideline limits of air pollution. [1]

Air quality is the measure of the concentration of pollutants in the air, which includes particulates and gaseous pollutants. [2]

There are six main air pollutants regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency: particulate matter (PM), nitrogen oxides, ozone, sulfur oxide, carbon monoxide and lead. Air quality influences health and quality of life as poor air quality has been linked to health impacts in humans. [2]

Daily air quality is reported through the Air Quality Index (AQI) that was developed by the EPA which tells citizens how clean or polluted their air is and what health concerns they should be aware of. There are other different guidelines and standards used to monitor and assess air quality, however the AQI focuses on health effects that can happen immediately within hours or days. [3]

BACKGROUND

Air pollution affects people throughout Maine which is a state with many regions of varying topography. [4] Pollutant impacts in one area of the state may be different from impacts in another area. For example, Aroostook County may record higher PM levels due to widespread farming operations and the type of soil, while Southern Maine may record higher ozone levels because of air masses originating from other areas of the U.S. [5]

Additionally, the source of PM depends on the season, for example in the winter PM originates from road dust, home heating appliance, while in the summer wildfire smoke is the source of PM. Ozone is most likely to reach unhealthy levels on hot sunny days and can be transported long distances by wind.

In 2025, Maine experienced twelve Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups (USG) days and one Unhealthy day using the Air Quality Index for PM and Ozone combined.

According to The State of the Air Report Card, Hancock County received a grade C with four days detecting levels of Ozone that were Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups. In addition, over 25% of the district's population are older adults (65 years and older), a group considered vulnerable to illness and death from exposure to pollutants. [7]

Types and Source of Air Pollutants

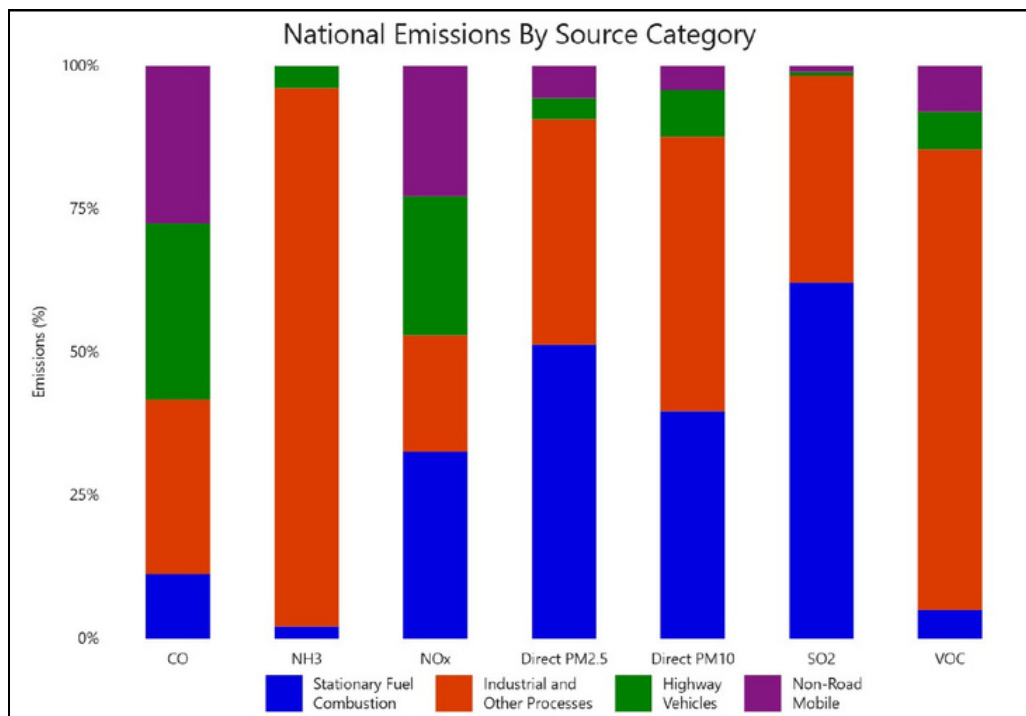
There are several pollutants that can be found in the air, the six major pollutant that the [Clean Air Act](#) requires U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to set indexes and standards for are:

- Carbon Monoxide
- Lead
- Nitrogen Dioxide
- Ground-level Ozone
- Particulate Matter (PM 10, PM 2.5)
- Sulfur Dioxide

Other Air Pollutants include Hazardous Air Pollutants such as benzene, asbestos, mercury, chromium, methylene chloride. [8]

Some pollutants are released directly into the atmosphere while other pollutants are formed in the air from chemical reactions:

- Ground-level ozone forms when emissions of NO_x and Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) from industrial facilities, electric utilities, motor vehicle exhaust, gasoline vapors and chemical solvents react in the presence of sunlight.
- Some PM are emitted directly from construction sites, unpaved roads, fields, smokestacks or fires and others from complex reactions in the atmosphere. [9]



[HTTPS://GISPUB.EPA.GOV/AIR/TRENDSREPORT/2024/#AIR_TRENDS](https://gispub.epa.gov/air/trendsreport/2024/#AIR_TRENDS)

Air Quality Monitoring

Air quality index (AQI)

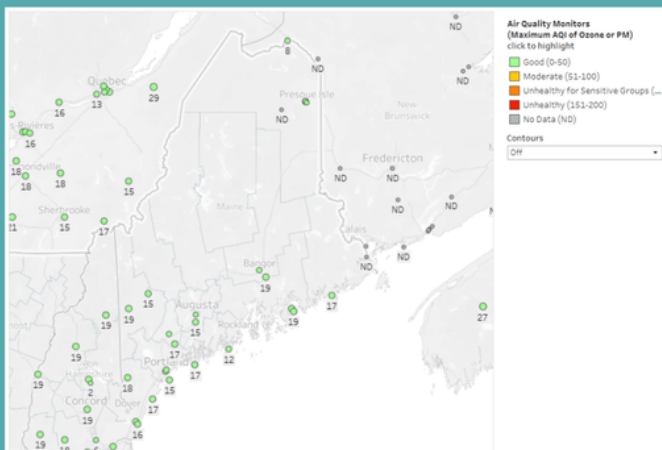
The AQI is an EPA tool for communicating about outdoor air quality and health that includes six color-coded categories, each corresponding to a range of index values. The higher the AQI value the greater the level of air pollution and the greater the health concern.

For each pollutant an AQI value of 100 generally corresponds to an ambient air concentration that equals the level of the short-term national ambient air quality standard for protection of public health. [10]

AQI Basics for Ozone and Particle Pollution

Daily AQI Color	Levels of Concern	Values of Index	Description of Air Quality
Green	Good	0 to 50	Air quality is satisfactory, and air pollution poses little or no risk.
Yellow	Moderate	51 to 100	Air quality is acceptable. However, there may be a risk for some people, particularly those who are unusually sensitive to air pollution.
Orange	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	101 to 150	Members of sensitive groups may experience health effects. The general public is less likely to be affected.
Red	Unhealthy	151 to 200	Some members of the general public may experience health effects; members of sensitive groups may experience more serious health effects.
Purple	Very Unhealthy	201 to 300	Health alert: The risk of health effects is increased for everyone.
Maroon	Hazardous	301 and higher	Health warning of emergency conditions: everyone is more likely to be affected.

Air Quality Index Based on Levels of Ozone and Particulate Matter



data.mainepublichealth.gov/tracking



Forecasts are issued based on the following expectations: ozone is the highest 8-hour average of the day, while particle pollution is the 24-hour average of the day.

Today's Forecast: February 11, 2026

Region	Ozone	Particle
Northern	Good	Good
Western Mtns	Good	Good
Western Interior	Good	Good
Eastern Interior	Good	Good
Southwest Coast	Good	Good
Mid-Coast	Good	Good
Downeast	Good	Good
High Elevation	Good	Good

[View Health Effects Legend](#)

Ozone Particle Pollution



Forecast Details:

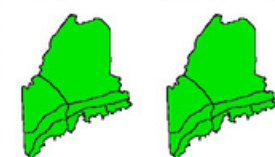
Updated Tuesday, February 10, 2026 @ 1:46 PM: Wednesday's Air Quality forecast for Ozone and Particle Pollution is GOOD statewide. -- Farrell

Tomorrow's Forecast: February 12, 2026

Region	Ozone	Particle
Northern	Good	Good
Western Mtns	Good	Good
Western Interior	Good	Good
Eastern Interior	Good	Good
Southwest Coast	Good	Good
Mid-Coast	Good	Good
Downeast	Good	Good
High Elevation	Good	Good

[View Health Effects Legend](#)

Ozone Particle Pollution



Forecast Details:

Updated Wednesday, February 11, 2026 @ 1:08 PM: Thursday's Air Quality forecast for Ozone and Particle Pollution is GOOD statewide. -- Waverly

Air Quality Standards and Guidelines

NATIONAL AMBIENT AIR QUALITY STANDARDS (NAAQS)

These are set by the EPA for six principal pollutants which can be harmful to public health and the environment. There are two types of national ambient air quality standards: Primary standards that provide public health protection and Secondary standards that provide public welfare protection. [11]

AMBIENT AIR GUIDELINES (AAGS)

These represent chemical concentrations in ambient air, below which there is minimal risk of a deleterious health effect resulting from long-term inhalation exposure. [12]

Pollutant [links to historical tables of NAAQS reviews]	Primary/ Secondary	Averaging Time	Level	Form
Carbon Monoxide (CO)	primary	8 hours	9 ppm	Not to be exceeded more than once per year
		1 hour	35 ppm	
Lead (Pb)	primary and secondary	Rolling 3 month average	0.15 µg/m ³ [1]	Not to be exceeded
Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂)	primary	1 hour	100 ppb	98th percentile of 1-hour daily maximum concentrations, averaged over 3 years
	primary and secondary	1 year	53 ppb [2]	Annual Mean

Ozone (O₃)		primary and secondary	8 hours	Chronic Ambient Air Guidelines (2025)					
Particle Pollution (PM)	PM _{2.5}	primary	1 year						
		secondary	1 year						
		primary and secondary	24 hours						
	PM ₁₀	primary and secondary	24 hours						
				primary	1 hour				
				secondary	1 year				
Sulfur Dioxide (SO₂)									

Chemical Name	CASRN	2025 AAG ppm-v	2025 AAG ug/m3	Basis
Acetaldehyde	75-07-0	2.52E-03	4.55E+00	cancer
Acetone	67-64-1	ND	ND	noncancer
Acetonitrile	75-05-8	3.57E-02	6.00E+01	noncancer
Acrolein	107-02-8	8.70E-06	2.00E-02	noncancer
Acrylonitrile	107-13-1	6.76E-05	1.47E-01	cancer
Allyl chloride	107-05-1	3.19E-04	1.00E+00	noncancer
Ammonia	7664-41-7	7.16E-01	5.00E+02	noncancer
Antimony trioxide	1309-64-4	1.67E-05	2.00E-01	noncancer
Arsenic (inorganic)	7440-38-2	7.59E-07	2.33E-03	cancer
Barium (and soluble compounds, as Ba)	7440-39-3	8.88E-05	5.00E-01	noncancer
Benzene	71-43-2	4.00E-04	1.28E+00	cancer
Benzo(a)pyrene	50-32-8	1.93E-07	2.00E-03	noncancer
Benzyl chloride	100-44-7	3.93E-05	2.04E-01	cancer
Beryllium	7440-41-7	1.13E-05	4.17E-03	cancer
Biphenyl	92-52-4	6.33E-05	4.00E-01	noncancer
Bis(2-ethylhexyl)phthalate	117-81-7	2.61E-04	4.17E+00	cancer
Bromodichloromethane	75-27-4	4.02E-05	2.70E-01	cancer
Bromoform	75-25-2	8.78E-04	9.09E+00	cancer
Butadiene, 1,3-	106-99-0	1.50E-04	3.33E-01	cancer

Ambient Air Guidelines (AAGs) represent chemical concentrations in ambient air, below which there is minimal risk of a deleterious health effect resulting from long-term inhalation exposure. The AAGs are calculated using an increased incremental lifetime cancer risk of one in a hundred thousand (1 x 10⁻⁶). The AAGs are derived to be protective for effects due to chronic exposure ("chronic" refers to long-term exposure), assuming a resident may be exposed to air 24 hours a day, 365 days per year for 70 years; therefore, these guidelines are most appropriately compared with long-term average ambient air measurements (e.g., annual average).

<https://www.epa.gov/criteria-air-pollutants/naaqs-table>

[HTTPS://WWW.EPA.GOV/CRITERIA-AIR-POLLUTANTS/NAAQS-TABLE](https://www.epa.gov/criteria-air-pollutants/naaqs-table)

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[HTTPS://WWW.MAINE.GOV/DEP/AIR/MONITORING/DOCS/ME_DEP_AAG_LIST_2025_FINAL_WITH%20NOTES.PDF](https://www.maine.gov/dep/air/monitoring/docs/me_dep_aag_list_2025_final_with%20notes.pdf)

Health Impacts

Air pollution exposure is associated with oxidative stress and inflammation in human cells, which may lay a foundation for chronic diseases and cancer. [13]

Exposure to outdoor air pollution is linked to various health conditions, particularly asthma and cardiovascular diseases. [4] The two most common types of pollution that can cause health problems are ozone and particle pollution.

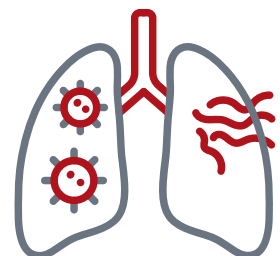
A high concentration of pollution in the air can irritate eyes and breathing passages in the nose, throat and lungs, and cause:

- Cough
- Wheeze
- Frequent or severe asthma attacks
- Irritation of eyes and throat
- Burning sensations in the chest
- Chest pain
- Fast heartbeat
- Reduced lung function- tightness or shortness of breath. [14]
- Other symptoms include headaches and tiredness. [15]

Frequent exposure to air pollution can raise the risk of:

- Respiratory diseases: COPD, emphysema, asthma, chronic bronchitis
- Breast cancer
- Non-Hodgkin lymphoma
- Lung cancer
- Heart attack
- Cardiovascular disease. [14]

More on [hazardous air pollutants health effects](#).



Vulnerable Populations

Air pollution can affect anyone. However certain populations are particularly at greater risk from air pollution such as children, older adults, asthmatic, pregnant, and those with heart or lung diseases. [14]

- Children's respiratory systems are still developing and they breathe more per pound of body weight than adults. Higher air pollution levels increases the risk for short-term respiratory infections, risk of developing asthma and lung damage leading to more school absences.
- Pregnant people breathing fine PM may increase risk for cognitive and emotional problems, cerebral palsy, ADHD-related behaviors, autism, high blood pressure, low birth weight, preterm birth and risk of post-partum depression.
- Older adults' bodies have less tolerance for the effects of pollutants. Studies show that ambient air fine particles increases the risk of dementia. Air pollution was linked to greater chance of developing several neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Another study associated high levels of air pollutants with bone damage.
- Lung disease: Ozone and PM put additional stress on the lungs in addition to causing various reactions within the lungs.
- Heart disease: particle pollution has long been known to negatively impact heart function, however recent studies also found a link between ozone and negative impacts on heart functions. [3, 13]



Tips for Individuals & the Community

BEFORE AN EVENT

- Be informed: Get information from local weather reports or the [U.S. Air Quality Index site](#)
- Clean or replace filters according to manufacturer recommendations
- Make your own portable indoor air cleaner if you do not have one
- Stock up on medicine: keep a 7-10 days supply of prescriptions in a safe, child-proof and waterproof container

DURING A POOR AIR QUALITY EVENT

- Limit your time outside to 30 minutes or less
- Keep windows closed and use the re-circulate setting on your air conditioner or heat
- Avoid strenuous outdoor activities
- Switch fitness activities from outdoor to indoor
- If you must spend time outside wear an N95 mask
- Take a shower after being outside to rinse particles from skin and hair
- Do not smoke, use candles, burn incense or use your fireplace
- Avoid using wood stoves or switch to a clean-burning wood stove
- Avoid cooking, especially frying or grilling
- Hold off on vacuuming
- If you must evacuate, alert officials at the shelter about your or your loved ones health conditions such as asthma, COPD or heart disease.

COMMUNITY-LEVEL TACTICS AND PUBLIC POLICIES TO MINIMISE TRAFFIC RELATED AIR POLLUTION

- Skip the fire pit: avoid burning wood or trash
- Limit driving: choose to carpool or combine errands
- Avoid gas-powered lawn care devices such as blowers or mowers
- Cut down on energy use in your home: electricity production has impact on air quality
- Use high-efficiency particulate air HEPA filter
- Build land-use buffers and vegetation barriers
- Improve urban design with gardens, parks and street-side trees
- Create active-travel options such as bicycling and walking paths.

[13, 14, 15]

Recommendations for Employers and Workers/Employees

EMPLOYERS

Ahead of time assess exposures from job tasks/work environment and stay aware of the local air quality conditions.

- Conduct a [Health Hazard Evaluation](#) for workplace hazards and monitor air quality
- Identify vulnerable and high risk workers to provide training and education

For outdoor workers:

- Provide enclosed buildings, structures or vehicles with filtered air
- Relocate work to less affected areas
- Reschedule work for a time with less pollution
- Avoid work that creates dust, fumes or smoke
- Rotate workers
- Reduce work intensity
- Provide additional rest periods
- Provide respirators: NIOSH certified N95 filtering facepiece respirator
- Teach staff how to properly wear respirators
- Monitor workers for symptoms of exposure
- Ensure paid sick time to any workers experiencing symptoms.

For indoor workers:

- Upgrade and maintain the filter efficiency of HVAC systems
- Change filters frequently
- Supplement with HEPA portable air cleaners
- Monitor indoor air quality.



EMPLOYEES AND WORKERS

- Monitor air quality using the [AirNow.gov](#)
- Advocate with your coworkers for:
 1. Proper protections
 2. Reduction, relocation or rescheduling work
 3. Rescheduling strenuous work
 4. Providing you with respirators
 5. Ensuring you are given sick time if exhibiting symptoms.

Under federal law, all employees covered by OSHA have a legal responsibility to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards, including those posed by wildfire smoke.
[20,21,22,23]

Role of Local Governments: Counties, Municipalities and Cities

Counties, cities and municipalities can engage with residents and groups such as auto repair shops, local colleges, business and civic organizations and state-wide and regional coalitions to:

- Educate and promote sound environmental choices among county employees
- Advocating these practices to residents and employers

Some tools local governments have and can use to help reduce emission and lessen exposure to pollution:

- Land use policies and city planning like zoning and creating “sensitive receptor” buffer zones can limit community exposure to air pollution
- Evaluating environmental impact and identifying mitigation strategies prior to issuing permits for large projects
- Creating and enforcing city-specific codes and action plans to promote clean air
- Local elected officials can create regional and even statewide policies beyond their own cities and counties
- Add poor air quality prevention to your Hazard Mitigation Plan
- Create and develop a response protocol for poor air quality days in partnership with frontline communities
- Create clean air centers in frontline communities by using spaces that are already common gathering spots
- Create a free air purifier program to distribute air purifiers to frontline communities
- Work with community-based organizations to ensure proper training and education on being prepared for poor air quality and how to use a mask
- Create model laws and enforce mechanisms to protect frontline communities such as outdoor workers from poor air quality.

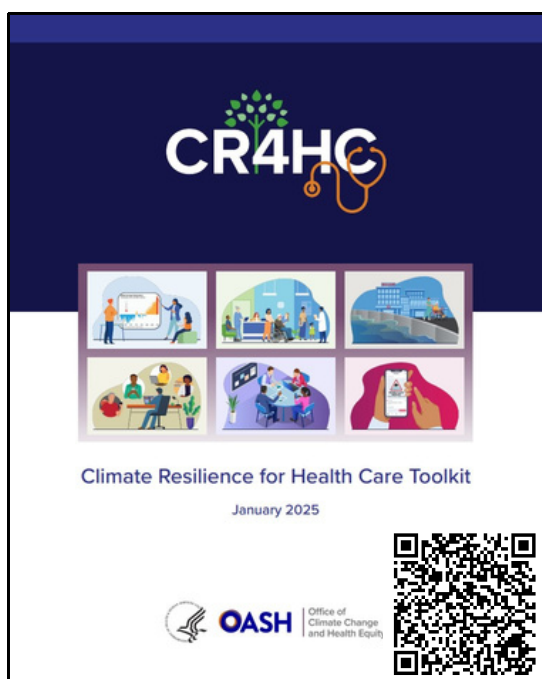
Frontline communities include those with respiratory illnesses, people who work outside all day and children whose lungs are not fully developed. Additionally, people of color and low-income communities, people who live in places with higher concentration of industries, utilities and traffic congestion are disproportionately affected by poor air quality events. [24,25]



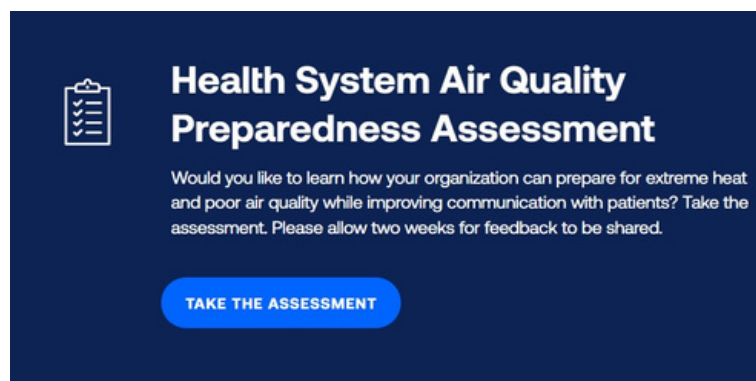
Healthcare Preparedness

Exposure to unhealthy air causes complications for people living with lung disease and puts others at risk of developing chronic illnesses. Patient-centered quality improvement efforts can help address the negative health impacts associated with air pollution.

- ☒ Ensure HVAC systems, when present are maintained and operating as intended.
- ☒ Place portable air cleaners in common areas.
- ☒ Adjust HVAC settings and upgrade air filters: add supplemental filtration at intake vent if possible.
- ☒ Monitor Indoor Air Quality using low-cost air monitors.
- ☒ Support Infection Preventionists and Building Operators/ Facility Managers.
- ☒ Consult Experts for a customized approach: work with occupational and environmental health and safety professional, HVAC specialist or other indoor air quality experts to identify additional strategies.
- ☒ Adopt and use strategies from the Climate Resilience for Health Care Toolkit to enhance resilience to climate-related hazards.
- ☒ Form a team, train staff, create and exercise your plan and include air quality communications to patients and employees. [16, 17, 18]



CLICK ON THE PHOTO TO TAKE THE SURVEY



[HTTPS://SURVEY.ALCHEMER.COM/S3/8125655/HEALTH-SYSTEM-AIR-QUALITY-PREPAREDNESS-ASSESSMENT](https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/8125655/HEALTH-SYSTEM-AIR-QUALITY-PREPAREDNESS-ASSESSMENT)

Healthcare Preparedness: Poor Air Quality Annex Template

I. Purpose

The purpose of this annex is to establish guidelines and procedures for [Facility Name] to prepare for, respond to and recover from poor air quality events such as wildfire smoke, high ozone or particulate matter incidents.

II. Scope

This plan covers all staff, patients, and visitors within the [Facility Name] facilities. It applies to all phases of an incident, including prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

III. Activation:

- **Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups (101-150):** Alert staff, activate vulnerable patient protocols.
- **Unhealthy (151-200):** Implement full facility, staff, and patient protection protocols.
- **Very Unhealthy/Hazardous (201+):** Activate emergency surge capacity, restrict all non-essential activities.

III. Concept of operations

In the event of a poor air quality event, the facility will activate its Incident Command System (ICS) structure. This annex outlines specific actions for each section of the command structure for three phases of a poor air quality event: pre-incident preparedness, during the incident, and post-incident recovery.

A. Pre-incident: Preparedness and mitigation

Incident Command/Leadership

- Conduct a risk assessment or hazard vulnerability analysis to understand the facility's specific risks.
- Form collaborative partnerships with local fire departments, emergency management, and other healthcare facilities within the healthcare coalition.
- Review and update the annex annually and after any major incident or drill.

Operations Section

- **Infrastructure hardening:** Collaborate with facilities staff to weatherize the building, install indoor monitoring devices/sensors
- **HVAC and air quality:**
 - Assess the HVAC system's ability to filter external air and install high-efficiency filters (MERV 13 or greater).
 - Procure and maintain portable air scrubbers or HEPA filters for critical areas such as patient care rooms, waiting room, staff break rooms and common areas.
 - Procure extra filters in advance.
 - Test HVAC system in smoke ready mode ahead of wildfire season.

CLICK ON THE PHOTO TO READ MORE

https://www.canva.com/design/DAHCCFRLYRY/AW1L8X2KNJU1VI6VT-WNTG/VIEW?UTM_CONTENT=DAHCCFRLYRY&UTM_CAMPAIGN=DESIGNSHARE&UTM_MEDIUM=LINK2&UTM_SOURCE=UNIQUELINKS&UTLID=HC497E50E59

What can providers do?

- Teach your patients how to wear an N95 mask correctly on poor air quality days.
- Help your patients keep track of local air quality, through AirNow website and app.
- Encourage patients to stay indoors with a HEPA filter or air conditioner if the Air Quality Index exceeds 100.
- Teach your patients the importance of not adding to indoor air pollution through smoking, gas range stoves, vacuuming, and candle use.
- Consider offering patients handouts on how to make their own HEPA filter fan.
- Ask your clinic or hospital to offer a clean air space for the vulnerable populations in your community on unsafe days. They can also fly the [EPA's Air Quality Flags](#) to give your community an easy way to know when air quality is unsafe.
- Be a community advocate for policy decisions that protect air quality and reduce CO2 emissions. [19]



[DIY Box Fan Filter](#)



[EPA Air Quality Flags](#)

Information

About Air Quality:

<https://www.cdc.gov/air-quality/about/index.html>

AirNow:

<https://www.airnow.gov/?city=false&country=false>

Air Quality Improvement: Guide for Local Governments:

https://www.naco.org/sites/default/files/documents/AQ_Factsheet%20-%20Air%20Quality%20Improvement%20Guide%20for%20Local%20Governments.pdf

Air Quality Resources for Professionals:

<https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/8125655/Health-System-Air-Quality-Preparedness-Assessment>

CDC Outdoor Air Quality Communications Toolkit:

<https://www.cdc.gov/air-quality/php/outdoor-air-quality-communications-toolkit/index.html>

EPA Air Quality Flag Program

<https://www.epa.gov/air-quality/air-quality-flag-program>

Maine DEP- Air Monitoring and Reporting:

<https://www.maine.gov/dep/air/monitoring/index.html>

Maine DEP- Air Quality and Health Information:

<https://www.maine.gov/dep/air/ozone/aqiandhealth.html>

Maine Tracking Network- Air Quality:

<https://data.mainepublichealth.gov/tracking/air-quality>

NIOSH Hierarchy of Controls:

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hierarchy-of-controls/about/index.html>

OASH Climate Resilience for Health Care Toolkit 2025

https://medsocietiesforclimatehealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/CR4HC_Toolkit_Final_12.20.2024.pdf

10 Tips to Protect Yourself from Unhealthy Air

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19. <https://www.montanaphc.org/wildfire-smoke.html>
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