

Wildfires and Your Health

A practical guide based on Spain's Ministry of Health wildfire recommendations

You know, every summer now it feels like we're talking about wildfires a bit earlier, and a bit more often. And this year, for the first time, Spain's Ministry of Health has actually sat down and written a dedicated guide on what wildfires do to our health — not just the fire itself, but the smoke, the heat, even the water supply afterwards. It came out at the end of June, and a lot of what's in it is stuff you can actually use.

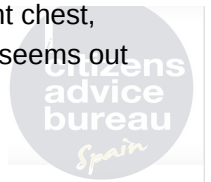


Why This Matters

Here's the number that stands out. Researchers looked across Europe and found that if you only count the people who die directly from a fire — burns, that sort of thing — you massively undercount the real toll. Once you factor in the smoke, the death toll is more than ninety percent higher than the headline figures suggest. That's not a small correction — it's a completely different picture of how dangerous these events are.

And the reason is smoke. We tend to picture wildfires as a flame problem — something happening a hillside away. But the smoke travels, and it's not simple smoke. It's a cocktail of fine particles and other pollutants, small enough to slip straight past your body's defences and get deep into your lungs, and even into your bloodstream.

So what does that actually feel like? In the short term — runny nose, sore eyes and throat, a cough that won't quit, headaches, feeling wiped out, dizzy. For some people it goes further — tight chest, racing heart, breathing trouble. And if you or someone near you starts getting confused or seems out of it, that's not something to wait out — that needs medical help straight away.



Longer Term Risks

The guide also goes into what repeated or heavy exposure can do over time, and it's worth knowing even if you're not in an at-risk group yourself, because you might know someone who is.

Asthma, bronchitis, COPD — all of that can get worse. Your lungs can lose capacity, sometimes permanently if exposure keeps happening. It's harder on your heart too — smoke irritates the arteries, which raises the risk of heart attacks and strokes. It can even throw off your heart's electrical rhythm, causing irregular heartbeats. Pregnant women face a higher chance of preterm birth. There's even research linking long-term exposure to problems with brain health down the line.

Who's Most at Risk

Some people need to take this much more seriously than others. The guide flags: anyone over 65, pregnant women, small children — especially under-fives — people who work outdoors, and anyone with an existing heart or lung condition, or a weakened immune system. If that's you, or someone in your family, the precautions below aren't optional extras — they're the main event.



The Practical Advice

Start with the basics. Stay calm — panic makes every decision worse. Drink plenty of water, and go easy on alcohol and caffeine, as they don't help you cope with heat or smoke. Cut out any travel you don't need to do, and if you must drive, put your headlights on even in daylight, because visibility drops fast in smoke.

Indoors — this is where most of us will be riding it out. Shut everything: windows, doors, chimneys, extractor fans, any vent that lets outside air in. Try to hole up in the coolest room in the house, ideally wherever the air conditioning is. Don't add to the indoor air pollution yourself — no smoking, no gas or wood stoves, skip the aerosols, don't vacuum, don't fry or grill anything. And when you're cleaning up dust or ash indoors, don't sweep it, as that just launches the particles back into the air. Wipe with a damp cloth instead.

Outdoors, if you absolutely have to be out there — stay well clear of any active fire, at least three hundred metres back. Take it easy, physically. And if you're out in smoke or ash, a mask helps, ideally protective glasses too, and cover your arms.

On masks: a surgical mask, a scarf, a bandana over your face — none of that stops smoke particles. They're just too small. What you actually need is an FFP2 or N95 mask. If you can get one with an activated carbon filter, even better, because that also helps against the toxic gases, not just the particles.

For vulnerable people specifically — keep a closer eye than usual on older relatives, young kids, anyone pregnant, anyone with a chronic condition. If you're in one of those vulnerable groups, somewhere nearby with proper air conditioning — a hospital, a care home — is genuinely a better bet than just the coolest room in an ordinary house. And know the warning signs that mean you stop waiting and get help: breathing difficulty, chest pain, a racing pulse, burns, or if someone can't get to medication they depend on.

In Case of Burns

If someone's clothing catches fire — get them to stop, drop, and roll, or smother the flames with a blanket. Don't use water to put out burning clothing, as that risks a steam burn. For a minor burn, run cool — not icy — water over it for twenty to thirty minutes. For anything more serious, don't try to peel away clothing that's stuck to the skin — leave it, cover the area with a clean, dry cloth to help prevent shock, and get emergency help moving. Never put ice, butter, oil, or any ointment on a burn — it doesn't help, and it can make things worse.

After the Fire

Don't fling your windows open the moment the sky looks clearer. Wait until the authorities actually confirm the outside air is safe. Avoid touching ash if you can, and if you do get it on your skin, wash it off promptly. When cleaning surfaces, same rule as before: damp cloth, not sweeping.

Water is worth thinking about too. After a big fire, ash and debris can get into the water supply, and depending on how severe the fire was and what the rain does afterwards, that contamination can hang around for months, sometimes years. Don't assume your tap water or a natural spring nearby is fine just because the fire's out — check with the local authorities first.

Same logic applies to food: if anything was directly exposed to smoke or ash, don't eat it. Even sealed packaging should be wiped down with clean water before you open it.

Mental Health

You don't need to have been physically hurt for a wildfire to leave a mark. People who've been evacuated, or lost a home, can carry real trauma — anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping or eating, grief for a place that doesn't look the same anymore. Kids especially can show it in quieter ways: irritability, clinginess, nightmares, struggling at school. If that's still going on weeks later, it's worth talking to your GP about, or reaching out to a support service.



Where to Get Real-Time Information

For an emergency, or to report a fire, call 112. For air quality, there's a government site — ica.miteco.es — worth bookmarking now, before you need it in a hurry. And check what you're sharing before you share it: misinformation during an emergency doesn't just annoy people, it can actually get someone killed if they act on the wrong information.

Source: Ministerio de Sanidad, "Recomendaciones sanitarias en actuaciones de incendios forestales 2026," published 27 June 2026. Summarised for Talk Radio Europe listeners.

