Our Health at Risk

Why Are Millions of Americans Still Breathing Unhealthy Air?

Americans across the country continue to breathe unhealthy air, leading to increased risk of premature death, asthma attacks and other adverse health impacts. To protect public health, the nation needs to maintain and build upon gains made under the Clean Air Act and the Clean Cars Standards, strengthen the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, and pursue additional pollution cuts.

Air Pollution Damages Health

Burning fossil fuels like coal, diesel, gasoline or natural gas creates air pollution.

- Smog, or ground-level ozone, causes respiratory harm, including coughing, asthma, increased risk of infection, and permanent damage to lung tissue.
- Particulate matter can also cause lung damage and trigger cardiovascular problems, including heart attacks and strokes. Particulate pollution can cause mothers to give birth prematurely, raise the risk of autism in their children, and stunt lung development. Recent studies also implicate particulate matter in an increased risk of dementia.
- There is no safe level of exposure to smog or particulates.

Smog Pollution

In 2015, communities in 49 states plus the District of Columbia experienced at least one day of elevated ozone smog pollution.

- Of the 10 cities with the most days of elevated smog pollution, seven were in California, along with the Denver, Phoenix and Las Vegas metropolitan areas.
- Residents of 34 metropolitan areas experienced more than 100 days in 2015 with elevated smog pollution. The Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque and Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan areas were among those that faced elevated levels of smog for more than three months of the year.
Smog Pollution in the Northeast

In densely populated Northeastern states, communities experienced frequent smog pollution in 2015, an indication that stronger measures are still needed to help curb air pollution in the region, despite recent progress.

- Residents of the Washington, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New York City and Baltimore metropolitan areas all experienced 89 or more days in 2015 of elevated levels of smog.
- Residents of smaller communities, such as York, Pennsylvania, and the Berlin area of New Hampshire and Vermont, also experienced frequent elevated smog levels.

Particulate Pollution

Elevated particulate pollution also affected hundreds of communities across the U.S. in 2015. The Riverside, Fresno, and Los Angeles, California, areas all faced more than 200 days of elevated particulate pollution in 2015, along with the Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and St. Louis metropolitan regions.

Global Warming May Worsen Air Pollution

Air pollution may become a greater problem in the future, as climate change warms the planet, alters weather patterns, and triggers other shifts that will create more air pollution. For example:

- Temperatures will rise, speeding up the chemical reactions that create smog. In addition, with increased temperatures, communities may experience more spring and fall days with unhealthy levels of ozone, in addition to the summer ozone problems that are common today.
- Changed wind patterns may increase the number of days with stagnant air, keeping pollution from being diluted. Multiple days of stagnant air can lead to especially high levels of pollution.
- Wildfires, already increasing in intensity and frequency due to drought and higher temperatures, create particulate matter and other air pollution that can travel for hundreds of miles.