

Dangerous air grips Maryland as wildfire smoke reaches near-record levels

Hospitals are bracing for an increase in respiratory and heart-related illnesses



Smoke from Canadian wildfires blankets Curtis Bay, casting a hazy veil over the industrial waterfront as poor air quality spread across the Baltimore region. (Kevin Richardson/Staff)



By **Nicole Pilsbury**

PUBLISHED: July 17, 2026 at 5:03 PM EDT | UPDATED: July 17, 2026 at 6:00 PM EDT

Marylanders faced some of the **worst air quality in recent memory** Friday, with pollution levels forecast to surpass those recorded during the 2023 Canadian wildfire smoke event, according to Joel Dreessen, a program manager for the Maryland Department of the Environment's air monitoring group.

The smoky skies are the result of wildfire smoke from Ontario combining with ozone pollution and the lingering effects of a summer heat wave. Health officials say the mix creates dangerous concentrations of fine particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream, posing the greatest risk to older adults, young children and people with heart or lung disease.

Canadian wildfires in June 2023 caused a 20% increase in heart and lung medical events at University of Maryland Medical System hospitals, and hospitals are predicting an influx of patients facing respiratory issues over the next few days as the smoke particles settle into the lungs and bloodstream.

"The impact on the human body can be significant," Dreessen, an air quality meteorologist, said. "Especially if you're already predisposed to sickness, illnesses or conditions that are already affecting the cardiovascular system."

Maryland began Friday under a Code Red, but most of the state was upgraded to Code Purple around 9:45 a.m. Friday. A Code Purple is called when the Air Quality Index, which analyzes the effects of pollutants, is between 201 and 300. The maximum one-hour levels and accumulated 24-hour averages of this smoke episode are in line with 2023, with the 24-hour average forecast to surpass previous levels and the one-hour maximum of 255 just falling short of 2023's peak of 279, Dreessen said.

He expects the smoke to start to clear Saturday as winds blow the smoke out of the region. High concentrations are predicted for Saturday morning, but the 24-hour average is predicted to descend toward the moderate threshold. **Saturday's predicted storms** are also expected to wash away the smoke, he added.

Smoke contains fine particulate matter small enough to penetrate the lungs and enter the bloodstream, which can cause health impacts. Air quality forecasts are based on extended averages to account for the health burden that sustained unhealthy air quality can cause, Dreessen said.

Dr. Umair Baig, an emergency medical physician at Greater Baltimore Medical Center, said he has seen more hospitalizations from heatstroke in the past two

weeks than he has in the past decade. The air quality, coupled with the preexisting heat risk, may lead to a surge of heat and air-quality-related hospitalizations over the weekend.

“It’s our patients with asthma, COPD, heart problems, the very elderly and the very young,” Baig, who is also the assistant medical director at GBMC’s emergency department, said. “I look at it as really targeting our vulnerable patients that are already at risk.”

Inhaling smoke can reduce the heart’s ability to receive enough oxygen from blood flow, further impairing patients who are already compromised, he added.

Dr. Panagis Galiatsatos, a pulmonologist and associate professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University, said that most air quality-related lung hospitalizations will not occur for another 48 hours, and cardiac hospitalizations may rise in about a week or two.

“Right now, you’re going to see a lot of this being handled by the outpatient clinics,” he said. “If those symptoms get severe enough, then you’ll start seeing the hospitalizations.”

Galiatsatos said nurses have already begun receiving calls from patients with underlying medical conditions, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma, describing symptoms like wheezing coughs, chest tightness and breathing issues.

He recommends that those with lung issues have a “lung action plan” prepared to mitigate air quality effects. He also emphasized checking the weather app and the AQI to make informed decisions about unhealthy air quality exposure.

While using N95 masks is advised for staying safe during air quality episodes, Galiatsatos said particles can still pose a risk.

“This is a big conversation of avoidance,” Galiatsatos said. “You have underlying lung issues, so you’re going to want to avoid things that will set it off.”

Dr. Cheyenne Falat, an emergency department leader at the University of Maryland Medical System, also anticipates an increase in respiratory cases over the next few days. But she thinks the high temperatures may deter people from risking air quality exposure, potentially reducing hospital visits.

Baltimore City paused outdoor city operations at noon on Friday to protect employees from the harsh conditions. Essential outdoor employees are provided with masks and extra breaks, according to a Friday news release from the office of Mayor Brandon Scott.

The city also canceled Parks and Recreation outdoor activities and closed outdoor public pools for Friday, according to the release.

The Maryland Zoo was taking precautions to protect both animals and people. No animals at the zoo have had reports of concerning respiratory issues, according to a statement from the zoo. Some species, including chimpanzees, have had their outdoor time limited because of the conditions.

The unhealthy conditions have not stopped some Marylanders from going about their day-to-day activities. Cathy Berryman said Ocean City, near 37th Street, was packed with people. Conditions were hazy, she said, but visibility remained mostly clear Friday afternoon.

Maria Ciccanti said the haze appeared lighter than Thursday from her oceanfront condominium.

“80° and a breeze keeps it comfortable breathing. Might be a little more intense inland. But the beach is filled with people,” she said.

Josh Davis contributed to this article. Have a news tip? Contact Nicole Pilsbury at npilsbury@baltsun.com.