

D.C.

Smoke from Canadian forest fires shrouds Washington, raising concerns

D.C. health officials urged children, older adults and people with heart or lung conditions to stay indoors Friday.

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Wildfire smoke obscures the sun as people stop to photograph the Washington Monument and Reflecting Pool in D.C. on Friday. (Julia Demaree Nikhinson/AP)

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A toxic shroud covered Washington on Friday morning as smoke from wildfires in Minnesota and Canada settled over the region, prompting health advisories and recommendations for people and animals to avoid unnecessary exposure.

The day began ominously as the sun rose, a milky-orange blob fighting through the haze hanging over the District. The Capitol was camouflaged by the gray smoke and the city's familiar monuments were difficult to discern from even short distances.

The acrid air prompted many residents and tourists to don face masks as they walked to work or took in the sights.

"It's been really yucky and hard to breathe," said Ahna Bielik, 25, as she walked from Union Station to her job at the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. Bielik wore a pink mask that she had picked up the day before from her hairdresser.

"I knew it would be coming so I wanted to be ready," she said.

Sandra Arteaga, 35, of Capitol Hill, said she could smell the smoke in her apartment when she woke up. "I could actually taste it."

She wore a mask but wasn't sure how much it was helping. "You can just feel something in your throat," she said.

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments issued a Code Purple air quality advisory, signifying "very unhealthy" conditions for everyone. The D.C. Department of Energy and Environment warned that the pollution was unhealthy especially for "sensitive groups, including children, older adults and people with heart or lung disease. Sensitive groups should avoid prolonged or heavy outdoor exertion."

D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) shared a post from D.C. Homeland Security & Emergency Management urging everyone to limit time outdoors.

Enrique Mendez, a 29-year-old construction worker who lives in Maryland and works in D.C., said he doesn't have any serious health issues but working outside all day "still concerns me a little bit."

What worries Mendez more are his team members with health problems. "I do have to keep an eye out on my guys," he said Friday morning while on his break in Glover Park. Mendez said he was constantly checking the air quality. If it gets too bad, he said, they'll leave. "Then it's time to pack up and get out of here," he said.

At 10 a.m., the air quality index for Washington was 230, squarely in the purple range according to AirNow.gov, which monitors air quality across the country.



A colored haze is cast over the U.S. Capitol. (Finn Gomez/Getty Images)

Huge amounts of wildfire smoke continued to pour into the United States from Canada early Friday as Detroit, Chicago and D.C. topped the list of the world's most polluted major cities.

Heavy smoke from distant wildfires has been linked to increases in health problems, particularly for people with heart and lung issues. In a 2024 study by the University of Maryland Institute for Health Computing (UM-IHC), researchers found that medical visits for heart and lung problems significantly increased over six days in June 2023,

when smoke from Canada created poor air quality days in Baltimore and the surrounding region.

“What we saw was that the probability that you would need a clinical encounter with a health care professional was 18 percent higher on those six days compared to control days from prior years at the same time of year,” said Bradley Maron, one of the study’s authors and a professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Health experts recommend wearing N95 or N100 masks and keeping windows closed at home and in your car. If using air conditioning, they suggest running it on the recirculation setting and closing the fresh air intake.

Numerous summer camp programs around the Washington region announced they would limit outdoor activities. The D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation closed all outdoor pools and spray parks, and canceled most outdoor activities.

While Friday’s smoky conditions kept many people indoors, not everyone was deterred. “I had a headache at first but you just get used to it,” said Anjali Deleon-Bello, 21, as she neared the end of a 10-mile run in Northeast Washington. A rising senior at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Deleon-Bello is in Washington for the summer doing an internship.

She briefly considered not running, she said, but “I had already carb loaded so I kind of needed to.”

“I saw the forecast and thought, ‘Okay, God has given me a new challenge,’” she said with a smile and then continued her run.

Darren Murphy, a charter school math teacher in D.C., had planned to take a 20-mile bike ride Friday morning to Virginia. But he cut the trip in half after checking with AI.

“I asked ChatGPT, ‘Should I run 20 miles today’ and it said ‘No, keep your ass in your house,’” Murphy said as he laughed and rode away.

But the smoke was no joke for Karen Gladding, who stepped out of her Capitol Hill home Friday wearing a mask to take her dogs Murphy and Remy for a walk.

Gladding, 66, grew up in California and said the smoke reminded her of “the worst days of the smog” from her early years in the Sacramento Valley region.

“They shouldn’t be out in this either,” Gladding said of her dogs, a poodle and a doodle.

“They won’t take as long of a walk as they really need.”