

National [Bushfires](#)

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Call for real-time air quality reporting as smoke continues to blanket Australia

**Rachel Clun****Updated** January 8, 2020 – 4.42pm, first published at 1.28pm

Asthma Australia has called on all states to provide real-time air quality reporting for small particle pollution as the number of ambulance call-outs for asthma related to bushfire smoke increased by 50 per cent throughout NSW and Victoria.

In NSW, the health department has distributed more than one million P2 masks to bushfire zones in southern parts of the state, as NSW Ambulance experienced a 50 per cent increase in respiratory call-outs in the first six days of 2020 compared to the same period last year.

On Wednesday, outdoor pools and tennis courts were closed as [smoke blanketing Sydney reduced the air quality to hazardous levels](#). Health Minister Brad Hazzard said air quality was "as bad as I can ever remember it".



Asthma Australia has called for real-time reporting of small particle pollution. BLOOMBERG

Ambulance Victoria experienced a 51 per cent increase in triple zero call-outs on Tuesday compared to an average day for breathing problems as smoke covered a large part of the state, with more poor air forecast for Thursday.

Asthma Australia chief executive Michele Goldman said the rolling 24-hour average for PM2.5 provided in NSW was not helpful for people with respiratory conditions as side effects could be experienced as soon as pollution levels increased.

"Being breathless or wheezy, a tight chest or persistent cough that won't go away, they're all symptoms of asthma and smoke will definitely trigger those symptoms or, worse, they can quickly deteriorate into a full blown asthma attack," she said.

"When people are being exposed to such severe amounts of bushfire smoke for such an extended period of time, it is really critical that people are able to make decisions to try to minimise exposure."

Ms Goldman said Victoria and Tasmania were providing hourly averages for PM2.5, so it was possible for other states to follow.

"It's something really practical the government can do quite easily and is something that the community is asking for," she said.

A spokesman for the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment said the government operated the "most comprehensive accredited air quality monitoring network in Australia".

"The NSW air quality index (AQI) is based on the world's strictest PM2.5 standards. However, there is no agreed air quality standard for hourly PM2.5 that can be used in an AQI," he said.

Hourly PM10 and PM2.5 data is available on the department's website, he said, and added that people with respiratory issues were encouraged to [register for SMS alerts](#).

Mr Hazzard said if more was needed in terms of air quality reporting "then of course the government will do more", but in the meantime he encouraged people in bushfire affected areas to access the masks the government was distributing at pharmacies and evacuation centres.

"Worn correctly, they can reduce dramatically particles entering the lungs," he said.

Professor Bin Jalaludin, the chief investigator with the Centre for Air Pollution, Energy and Health Policy Research, said while timely updates would be useful for people planning outdoor activities, it was unclear what sort of time frame would work.

"It's a good opportunity when we do have events like this to review how we do things - in the end it may be decided that maybe this [24-hour rolling average] is the best way," he said.

"We have to find out how do people want to use that information and in what form will they find it most useful."

Length of exposure a concern

Australian Medical Association president Dr Tony Bartone said the density and length of smoke exposure "for communities near and far from fire" was "a new and potentially fatal health risk many within our community have not previously faced".

"The more dense and longer smoke inhalation persists, the higher the risk previously healthy people face of developing serious respiratory illnesses," he said.

Dr Bartone said governments had not planned for "the scale and length of these fires", or its health impacts.

From December 30 to January 5 there had been an increase in NSW emergency department presentations for asthma and breathing problems to 1115, up from the five-year average of 829.

"We've seen about a 20 per cent increase in presentations associated with the poor air quality," NSW chief health officer Dr Kerry Chant said.

Ms Goldman said Asthma Australia has [launched a smoke impact survey](#) to ascertain how many people have been affected.

While at least two people have died as a result of smoke-related asthma flare-ups, she said it's unclear the extent of what the tens of thousands of people with asthma have experienced recently.

"Over the next decade it's inevitable we'll have more bushfires of this scale, so how can we ensure we're better prepared and what can we put in place now?" Ms Goldman said.

"Insights of people on the ground are going to be critical to informing that."

With Dana McCauley



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