

Dust Storms – Health Impacts

Dust storms are natural events that occur when heavy winds blow loose sand, dirt and other fine particles from deserts and semi-arid landscapes into urban areas.

Commonly, particles in dust storms tend to be coarse and not easily breathed into the lungs. As such, they do not pose a serious health threat to the general public.

However, some people with pre-existing breathing-related problems, such as asthma and emphysema, may experience difficulties.

The severity of a dust storm will depend on the size of the particles, composition of the particles, your current health, and how long you have been exposed to the dust storm.

Exposure and health effects of dust storms

The most common symptoms experienced during a dust storm include:

- Itchy or burning eyes;
- Throat irritation; and
- Skin irritation.

People who may be more vulnerable than others are:

- The young;
- The elderly;
- People with respiratory conditions, such as asthma, bronchitis and emphysema; and/or
- People with heart disease.

For these people, exposure to a dust storm may:

- Trigger allergic reactions and asthma attacks;
- Cause serious breathing-related problems; and/or
- Contribute to cardiovascular or heart disease.

Prolonged exposure to airborne dust can lead to chronic breathing and lung problems, and possibly heart disease.

What health precautions can I take?

The following precautions can help you minimise health effects from exposure:

- Leave the area for a cleaner environment;
- Stay indoors, with windows and doors closed;
- Stay in air-conditioned premises and switch the air-conditioner to 'recycle' or 'recirculate' to reduce the amount of dust entering the building;
- Visit a local air-conditioned building such as a library, community centre or shopping centre;
- Avoid vigorous exercise, especially if you have a heart or lung condition;
- If it is safe to do so, check on elderly neighbours or other people who you think might need extra help; and
- If you have a heart or lung condition, follow your treatment plan prescribed by your doctor and consult your general practitioner, if required. **If you experience chest tightness, wheezing, difficulty breathing, or your symptoms do not settle, seek urgent medical assistance.**

Where can I find more information about dust storms?

ACT Health routinely monitors air quality at several sites across Canberra. If monitoring determines that air quality in Canberra is a hazard to health, the Chief Health Officer will issue an alert to the public. For more information, visit the ACT Health website: <http://www.health.act.gov.au>.

Accessibility

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