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Understanding air quality alerts

Air quality is a growing concern in many communities. Contaminants in the air have been known to cause everything from minor allergies to severe lung damage and even cancer. Familiarizing oneself with air quality alerts -- particularly during the warm weather -- can enable people to take the proper precautions.

The World Health Organization ranked Canada third in the world for best air quality. Most countries that rank well in air quality benefit from lower population density, favourable climates and stricter air pollution regulation.

While many areas around the world have air quality that hovers within a certain range, at certain times of the year the quality of air may change, prompting an alert to the public. Air quality alerts are designed to help protect public health on days when air quality is particularly unhealthy. These alerts are usually based on extra ozone or particulate matter found in the air.

Ozone is composed of three oxygen atoms. Depending on where the ozone is found, it can affect health in different ways.

Stratospheric ozone is the layer of gas that occurs several miles above the Earth's surface, preventing harmful UV rays from reaching the ground. However, tropospheric, or ground-level, ozone is created by chemical reactions between oxides of nitrogen and volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, in the presence of sunlight. Emissions from industrial facilities and electric utilities as well as motor vehicle exhaust can contribute to this bad form of ozone. Ground-level ozone is a particular problem during the summer months because strong sunlight and hot weather result in harmful ozone concentrations in the air.

The term particulate matter, or PM, includes both solid and liquid droplets found in the air. Particulates can come in different sizes. However, particles measuring less than 10 micrometers in diameter tend to pose the greatest health concern because they can be inhaled and become lodged in the respiratory system.

The Air Quality Health Index or "AQHI" is a scale designed to help you understand what the air quality around you

means to your health.

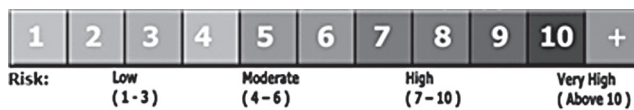
The AQHI communicates four primary things;

- It measures the air quality in relation to your health on a scale from 1 to 10. The higher the number, the greater the health risk associated with the air quality. When the amount of air pollution is very high, the number will be reported as 10+.

- A category that describes the level of health risk associated with the index reading (e.g. Low, Moderate, High, or Very High Health Risk).
- Health messages customized to each category for both the general population and the 'at risk' population.
- Current hourly AQHI readings and maximum forecasted values for today, tonight and tomorrow.

Ozone may be high in the summer, while particles may be high in the winter. To help reduce air pollution on alert days, take mass transportation to cut down on the amount of vehicular exhaust.

Air quality has a direct effect on personal health. It is important to heed daily air quality advisories.



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