

What is the Detwiler Fire doing to the Valley's air quality?

By Ashleigh Panoo

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A health alert issued for the central San Joaquin Valley will remain in place until the Detwiler Fire is contained, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said Wednesday.

Skies over Fresno have been hazy for several days and residents have awakened to find ash falling outside. With the fire only 7 percent contained as of midday Wednesday, the haziness will continue, according to the National Weather Service. "Areas of smoke from area wildfires will persist across the Central California interior," the service said.

Air alerts from the National Weather Service have also been issued for Mariposa and Tuolumne counties, as well as Mono and Alpine counties on the east side of the Sierra. Those areas are being affected by smoke blowing over the range.

Smoke and ash particles can enter eyes or lungs and cause burning, a runny nose and other respiratory illnesses, the district said. Those with chronic heart or lung diseases are more susceptible, and it may trigger asthma attacks and acute bronchitis. The district also cautions children and the elderly against strenuous activity and prolonged exposure to the outside air. Air quality tends to get worse in the afternoon.

Community Regional Medical Center in Fresno sees an influx of patients in the emergency room when the temperatures go up and the air quality goes down. "In the summertime, things are dry. It really impacts pulmonary patients who are very vulnerable," said Dr. Rais Vohra, an emergency medical doctor at the hospital and emergency medicine faculty member at the UCSF Fresno Medical Education Program.

"We see patients with asthma and chronic lung disease coming to the ER," he added. "Respiratory infections seem to get worse and flare up." The most common symptom patients cite is not being able to catch their breath.

Although Vohra doesn't keep records on how many people come in for air quality-related illnesses, he said the combination of breathing the air outside and the dehydration from heat is a common trigger that brings people in.

He said smokers risk adding more injuries to their lungs during this time. Even quitting for a short time has acute health benefits, Vohra said. "Any time is a good time to stop smoking."

Carlos Flores, a registered nurse and trauma coordinator at Valley Children's Hospital, says although many kids visit the hospital for respiratory illnesses, he doesn't necessarily see a spike during days with bad air quality.

As of Wednesday, the district's air monitors signaled nothing out of the ordinary, but spokeswoman Cassandra Melching said the danger lies in what the monitors can't pick up.

Monitors are designed to detect fine particulate matter, which can't be seen by the naked eye. "Ash is a lot larger," Melching said. "We tell people, if you can see and smell smoke and see ash falling, treat it as a level four or five. Stay indoors in that cool filtered air."

Melching said wildfires, bad air quality and even raining ash are a normal part of summer in the Valley. "We're surrounded by mountain ranges," she said. "This is what we get."