

Dust Storms

Dust is everywhere, both inside and outside. We usually don't think about it much. But in some areas of Washington, high winds can raise large amounts of dust from dry, loose, or disturbed soil. This can create a dust storm, which can cause serious health problems for people living in the area. You can protect your health by being prepared for dust storms.

Q: Who should be concerned about dust storms?

A: Breathing large amounts of dust can be bad for anyone's health. But those at highest risk are:

- Infants, children, teens, the elderly, and pregnant women
- People with asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, or other breathing problems
- People with heart disease
- Healthy people working or exercising outdoors (for example, farm workers, construction workers, runners, and sports teams)

Q: How can I protect myself?

A: The smallest dust particles are the most harmful, so the best precaution is to stay indoors when there is a lot of dust in the air. If you must go out, spend as little time as possible outside, and avoid hard exercise. Wearing a dust mask that covers your mouth and nose can protect you from some larger dust particles.

If you are driving during a dust storm, be alert for sudden changes in visibility and pull over if you have trouble seeing. Try not to drive during windy conditions that could stir up dust on the roads.

If your home has an air cleaner, make sure it has high efficiency particulate-absorbing (HEPA) filters. Find information about air cleaners and filters at www.arb.ca.gov/research/indoor/particles.htm. After a dust storm, vacuum furniture and floors with a vacuum cleaner that has a HEPA filter, and make sure the filter is clean.

WHY IT MATTERS

Dust is made up of tiny particles called particulate matter. The smallest particles, called PM_{2.5} or PM₁₀ depending on their size, are so small they can get past your body's natural defenses. They can be breathed deep into your lungs, where they can cause or worsen problems such as:

- Lung irritation
- Allergic reactions
- Asthma
- Heart disease
- Chronic bronchitis

Young children, the elderly, and people with heart or breathing problems are the most likely to suffer health effects from dust storms; but everyone should take precautions.

Contact information:

Contact your local clean air agency:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/local.html>

Special accommodations:

If you need this publication in an alternate format, call the Air Quality Program at 360-407-6800. Persons with hearing loss, call 711 for Washington Relay Service. Persons with a speech disability, call 877-833-6341.

Q: Are there ways to know ahead of time if a dust storm is coming?

A: Sometimes. Most dust storms happen in the spring or fall, due to a combination of high winds, dry weather conditions, and uncovered fields. The National Weather Service announces high wind warnings, so your local news may be able to warn you in advance when conditions are ripe for a dust storm. You can sign up to receive Wireless Emergency Alerts about high wind warnings from the National Weather Service (visit <http://www.weather.gov/emailupdates/> for more information). But the best thing to do is always be prepared.

Q: What can I do to be prepared?

A: Windblown dust can't be completely controlled or avoided, but there are some things you can do to protect yourself during a dust storm. Be ready to stay inside and close your windows, vents, and doors, and plug drafts. If you have allergies or breathing problems, ask your health care provider or [local health department](#) what they recommend. If they suggest wearing a mask during a dust storm, buy some and keep them on hand. If dust is a serious health problem for you, your health care provider may advise you to be ready to leave the area during a dust storm.

Q: Is there any way to reduce the risk of dust storms?

A: There are some things we can do to prevent windblown dust; but even our best efforts can be overwhelmed by drought and high winds. Farmers prevent and reduce dust by using new tilling methods and planting cover crops that hold the soil in place. Dust controls at construction sites include working in phases to minimize the amount of exposed land area, and using dust suppressants or gravel on bare ground. Contact your [local clean air agency](#) or city or county planning department if there is a dust problem in your area.

Big dust storms can't be prevented, but throughout Washington, Ecology and our partners monitor air quality to measure amounts of pollution in the air. This helps pinpoint areas with levels of pollution that could cause health problems so we can work toward reducing and controlling pollution.

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: Visit Ecology's web site at http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/other/Windblown_dust_information.htm

Visit <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/com/weatherreadynation/wea.html> to learn more about receiving high wind alerts.