

Face masks – questions and answers

Community information February 2014

This information has been developed by the Department of Health in response to community questions and concerns about smoke and ash from the Hazelwood open cut mine fire.

Air quality is being monitored daily and a range of options are now in place to provide some relief and respite.

It is better to stay indoors, away from the smoke. If you cannot avoid going outdoors and choose to wear a face mask to reduce inhalation of particles and gases in the air, it's important to understand their benefits and limitations.

There are many different types of face masks. This fact sheet is about P2 face masks and has been provided to answer many of the questions being asked.

Are all face masks the same?

No. The masks being distributed are called P2 masks. Ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas do not filter out fine particles or gases from coal fire smoke and are generally not very useful in protecting your lungs.

Will a P2 mask provide total protection?

No. P2 masks don't provide complete protection. They do not remove or protect against gases contained in the smoke such as carbon monoxide.

What are the benefits of wearing a P2 mask?

Fitted properly, a P2 mask can filter out some of the fine particles from smoke. Make sure the mask is fitted properly and a good seal has been achieved. The mask should be sealed over the bridge of the nose and mouth, and there should be no gaps between the mask and face. Men should be clean shaven to get a good seal.

What are some of the problems with P2 masks?

P2 masks can be very hot and uncomfortable and can make it harder for you to breathe normally. If the mask isn't fitted properly or becomes loaded up with particles from extended use, it will be even less effective.

Is there anyone who shouldn't wear a P2 mask?

Anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition should seek medical advice before using a face mask.

Children, the elderly, pregnant women, smokers and those with existing heart or lung conditions, including asthma are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in fine particles.

Children in particular, may find it difficult or impractical to wear a face mask correctly so should instead reduce exposure to the smoke and ash.

Who can provide more information about face masks?

The Health Assessment Centre in Morwell is staffed by paramedics and nurses who can provide information on who may benefit from wearing a mask and how to ensure they are fitted correctly.

Where can I get a P2 mask?

- Community Health Assessment Centre, Ambulance Victoria Gippsland Regional Office, 2 Saskia Way in Morwell, next to the Mid-Valley Shopping Centre, 8am – 8pm.
- Moe Town Hall respite centre, Albert Street, 9am - 7pm.
- Static CFA information bus, Elgin Street between Tarwin Street and Chapel Street near the Morwell Coles, 9am – 5pm.
- Mobile information points.

What else can I do to protect my family from the smoke and ash?

Monitor air quality and act according to the smoke level advised by the EPA.

Health advice for sensitive people during low smoke advisory levels and for everyone in the community during high smoke advisory levels includes:

- Avoiding prolonged or heavy physical activity and keep informed about fire activity in their immediate area.
- Considering temporarily staying with a friend or relative living outside the smoke-affected area.

Look after your health by taking medication as prescribed by your doctor. People with asthma should follow their asthma management plan.

Where can I get more information?

Health concerns -

- Seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

Air quality and smoke -

- Environment Protection Authority on 1300 761 874 (business hours)
- www.epa.vic.gov.au - this site includes a simple tool to help individuals assess air quality based on visibility.

All other assistance -

- Call the Victorian Emergency Recovery Information Line on 1300 799 232.

How to put on and fit check a P2 or N95 face mask



Separate the edges of the mask to fully open it. The mask should be worn with the orange side out.



Bend the nose wire to form a gentle curve. The nose wire is at the top of the mask.



Hold the mask upside down to expose the two straps.



Using your index fingers and thumbs, separate the two straps.



While holding the straps, cup the mask under your chin.



Pull the straps up and over your head.



Place and position the lower strap at the base of your neck (under your ears).



Place the upper strap on the crown of your head so it runs just above the top of your ears.



Gently press the nose wire down across the bridge of your nose until it fits snugly.



Continue to adjust the mask and edges until you feel you have achieved a good and comfortable fit.

Fit check

Gently inhale. When you breathe in, the mask should draw in slightly towards the face and collapse.



A 'fit check' must be performed each time a P2 or N95 mask is worn.

Gently exhale. The mask should fill up with air. It is important at this stage that there is no air leakage around the edges of the mask.



Follow these directions each time the mask is worn. The masks will not provide the intended level of protection unless worn correctly so it is important that you achieve a good fit as detailed above. Men who are clean shaven will achieve the best facial seal. The brand of P2 or N95 masks may vary slightly so always follow the manufacturer's instructions and warnings.