

SUMMER HEAT, WILDFIRE SMOKE, AND HEALTH

SUMMER 2024 MAY BE VERY HOT AND SMOKY: RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR OWNERS AND MANAGERS OF RENTAL AND STRATA HOUSING

Summer forecasts for British Columbia are predicting severe wildfires and related smoke events. Extreme heat events, or heat waves, may also occur throughout the summer. These events can put tenants/residents at risk for illness or death, even when they are at home in their units. Owners and managers of rental and strata housing can make potentially lifesaving decisions that protect tenants/residents.

Heat and health

Heat events can cause heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and **heat stroke**, and can worsen pre-existing health conditions such as heart disease. This can lead to severe illness or death. **As the climate warms, heat events will become more common.**

Hundreds of people died during the 2021 heat dome, and most who died lived alone in the community. People who live in buildings without air conditioning are at higher risk because heat can increase indoors day after day during heat events. Indoor temperatures of **31°C or higher are especially dangerous**, but temperatures **over 26°C can be harmful** for people who are more susceptible. Indoor temperatures can also remain high late into the evening and for days after a heat event, even when temperatures have dropped outside. It may also be difficult for people to find other cool places to stay.

People who are **elderly** are at more risk because they are less physically able to control their body temperature and may not notice thirst or high body temperature as easily. Certain medications can also make it harder for the body to regulate heat. Similarly, people with mental health concerns, including schizophrenia, are at higher risk. Risk is heightened for those who lack social connections and support, with no one around to check on them.

Barriers to staying cool

Owners and managers of rental housing or stratas sometimes enforce policies about residents installing and using air conditioning or using other cooling measures, such as window covers or awnings. **These barriers can put people's health at risk.**



Health Authority recommendations for heat

In advance of the summer season, we recommend owners and managers of rental and/or strata housing **consider reducing any barriers that would prevent residents from keeping cool.**

- » Check if strata bylaws or rental agreements prohibit cooling measures, and if they exist, encourage the strata council or building management to change them. Advertise any changes to tenants/residents.
- » **Learn about the [BC Hydro free air conditioner program](#)** and let tenants/residents know you support the program. Units are portable, installed by professionals, and do not damage the building. Units are low wattage and low amperage, reducing cost and power load.
- » **Share [information and posters](#)** on how to stay healthy during the heat. Materials are available on the Regional Health Authority websites listed below.
- » Encourage residents to **check on potentially isolated neighbours**. Resources on how to complete a supportive [heat wellness check](#) can be found on the Regional Health Authority websites listed below.

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Health Authorities encourage owners and managers of buildings to:

- » During heat events, **open a cool, air-conditioned common room for residents**. For people at risk from heat, even walking or rolling a few blocks may worsen health conditions so cooling spaces at home may be the only option for these residents to cool down. If this is not possible, encourage the use of nearby cool outdoor green spaces or cooling centres.
- » Share information about **nearby cooling centres and spaces**. Local government websites and social media accounts often have lists or maps of these cooling resources.

Risk of falls from windows

Dangerous falls can occur during hot weather when windows are used to cool homes. From 2016 to 2020, trauma centres across BC admitted 81 children after falls from windows or balconies. Building owners and managers can help prevent these injuries by installing window guards or window stops, and/or permitting residents/tenants to do so.

Air quality events and health

Wildfire smoke events are becoming more frequent and severe as the climate changes, resulting in more days with poor air quality that can impact health.

Providing cleaner indoor air inside all buildings is the best way to protect health during wildfire smoke events. Building owners and managers can help protect tenants/residents preparing the building for air quality events.

Health Authority recommendations for air quality

Housing managers are encouraged to:

- » Conduct **regular maintenance** of HVAC systems.
- » Install air filtration with a rating of **MERV 13 (MPR 1900)** or greater in the existing building ventilation system when possible.
- » Assess whether the ventilation system can be run in “re-circulation” mode during times when outdoor air quality is poor, to ensure the building air is passing through the ventilation system filter regularly while reducing the introduction of air from outdoors.
- » Create a **smoke readiness plan** to protect occupants. Plans should consider actions to **limit smoke entry** into buildings and adding supplemental air filtration during smoky periods.
- » Create **temporary cleaner air spaces** in shared spaces using **portable HEPA filter air cleaners** or using of **home-made filtration devices**.
- » **Subscribe to air quality advisories and alerts** for your region (**Metro Vancouver** or **British Columbia**).
- » During smoke events, share/ post **resources** on **the health impacts** of smoke and how to access the **Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)** nearest to you, in multiple languages if possible. It can also be helpful to look at the air quality data near you using the **low-cost sensor PM_{2.5} air quality map**.



We are here to help

For more information to share with your residents and partners, please see fraserhealth.ca/heatsafety or fraserHealth.ca/airquality or vch.ca/climatechange.

For more guidance, please contact healthybuiltenvironment@fraserhealth.ca or healthy.environments@vch.ca