

When the Air We Breathe Becomes the Risk

Protecting California Workers from Wildfire Smoke Exposure



EKHealth
Experience Better Managed Care™

SEPTEMBER 2025

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Protecting California Workers from Wildfire Smoke Exposure

Wildfires are no longer just a seasonal event — they are a year-round reality in California. In the last two decades, wildfire frequency, intensity, and duration have increased dramatically, burning larger areas of land and producing smoke that can travel hundreds of miles. The result? Significant impacts on air quality, worker health, and business continuity.



DOUG BENNER

MD, MS, MRO

Chief Medical Officer

“ Wildfire smoke is one of the most complex environmental health challenges we face. It's not just what we see in the air — those fine particles go deep into the lungs, and the impact can be immediate and long-term.

— Dr. Doug Benner, Chief Medical Officer, EK Health

The Health Risks of Wildfire Smoke

Wildfire smoke contains a dangerous mix of pollutants, including fine particulate matter (PM2.5), volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and toxic gases such as carbon monoxide and formaldehyde.

Health Impacts Include:

- Respiratory & Cardiovascular: Coughing, wheezing, asthma flare-ups, COPD exacerbation, chest pain, and increased risk of heart events
- Pregnancy & Development: Preterm birth, low birth weight, and hypertensive disorders
- Mental Health: Stress, anxiety, and depression caused by evacuations, property loss, and disrupted routines
- Community Safety: Abandoned homes can increase access to illicit substances and firearms, further stressing public health systems

The mental health toll is often overlooked. People face constant uncertainty and disruption. Employers must address both the physical and psychological impacts of smoke exposure.

— Dr. Benner

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EK Health's Approach: *Right Plan, Right Time*

EK Health partners with employers to keep workers safe, healthy, and productive — even when the air turns hazardous. Employers can't control where the smoke blows, but they can control how prepared they are to respond. This includes items such as:

- **Early Intervention & Education**
Training workers to recognize symptoms early and access care promptly.
- **Right Protection, Right Time**
Guidance on respiratory protection programs, clean air shelters, and monitoring PM2.5 levels.
- **Compliance Navigation**
Support aligning with Cal/OSHA's emergency regulations and documentation requirements.
- **Mental Health Support**
Connecting affected workers to counseling resources and stress-management tools.

What YOU Can Do Today



Review your wildfire smoke response plan

Ensure it aligns with the latest Cal/OSHA requirements.



Communicate proactively with employees

Let them know how you're protecting their health.



Partner with trusted vendors

Support aligning with Cal/OSHA's emergency regulations and documentation

Article Sources:

Li et al., 2022 – Wildland-Urban Interface Housing Growth in California
Averett et al., 2024 – Toxicity of Wildfire Smoke in Treated Wood Areas
U.S. EPA – Health and Environmental Effects of Particulate Matter (PM)
Cal/OSHA – Protection from Wildfire Smoke Regulations

ABOUT EK HEALTH SERVICES

EK Health Services Inc. is a leading national workers' compensation managed care organization. EK Health restores quality of life for injured workers through innovative, cost-effective solutions, while providing client services with high-touch experiences, customizable solutions, lower costs, and proven results. Our holistic approach integrates the best people, processes, and technology to facilitate the best medical treatment available for return-to-work possibilities.

Learn more about EK Health's solutions at www.ekhealth.com.

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