

## High pollution levels pose health risk, experts suggest precautions

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**NEW DELHI:** The continued bad air run in the capital entails health hazards for its citizens, doctors and health experts said on Tuesday, suggesting a series of precautions such as not venturing out early in the morning, wearing a mask and avoid construction sites.

Doctors with at least three city hospitals said they have been getting more patients with exacerbation of respiratory conditions such as asthma, respiratory infections, heart attacks and stroke.

Delhi's air quality has stayed in the poor or worse zone since October 27. It stayed in the severe zone for three consecutive days since November 5, improved slightly to very poor on Monday, but worsened to return into the severe category on Tuesday.

Experts say long term exposure to the toxic air can lead to several health problems to people of all age groups, including increase in blood pressure, under-development of lungs in infants, chronic lung conditions in adults, cancers, low immunity, and depression.

"I don't think there is exact data for Delhi, but it appears reasonably certain that this level of exposure for this duration is associated with significant damage. There will be earlier onset of Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), more asthma exacerbations, and more lung fibrosis. Ageing will be faster," said Dr Anurag Agarwal, director of the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology who has worked on asthma and lung health. He is himself an asthmatic.

**How to stay safe**

Not only might those with chronic conditions, even seemingly healthy people start experiencing symptoms when the pollution levels shoot up, experts say.

"Even those without any history of chronic condition may experience symptoms such as dryness of throat, itching in the eyes, cough, feeling tired and disturbed sleep with such high levels of pollution. Those who already have lung disease may land up in the emergency department. Some of them in our experience, respond to only cortico-steroids," said Dr GC Khilnani, former head of the department of pulmonology at AIIMS and chairman of PSRI Institute of Pulmonary and Critical Care.

"Everybody should take precautions. Healthy people should not go for walks or jogs early in the morning; the pollutants are at the breathable height at this time. Go for an exercise only when there is bright sunlight, when the temperature goes up, the pollutants also rise up. The masks that we use

for Covid-19, has little or no value against Covid-19. If at all, people have to use an N95 mask,” he said.

Dr Khilnani added, “Those who already have a history of respiratory conditions should avoid going out at all. They should also ensure that they take their medicine regularly to avoid emergency. Those with severe asthma or COPD may consider the use of air purifiers; there is no conclusive evidence that they help but they do reduce the levels of PM2.5 etc.”

#### Pollution and Covid-19

Doctors said the high levels of pollution can be bad news for those who have recently recovered from Covid-19.

“If we see the post-covid-19 scenario, there is a large proportion of people who have post-pneumonic pulmonary fibrosis and long Covid-19. These people are more likely to get cough, breathlessness, chest discomfort, lung infection just like those with other chronic respiratory conditions when the pollution levels shoot up,” said Dr Khilnani.