

CHOKER ON SMOKE

The homeless can't escape when the air outside is unhealthy

Walking through downtown last week was like trying to breathe underwater. The heavy smoke stung the eyes and turned even a casual stroll into intense exercise for the lungs. The streets were quiet — most citizens were hiding indoors to stay away from the polluted air.

Some, however, had no refuge.

“Most people are able to have some reprieve from the smoke and with our homeless population — they just don't,” says Wendy Choi, medical director at White Bird Medical Clinic.

“The biggest problem with our population is that they don't have anywhere to go to get away from it, that's the sad truth,” Choi adds.

From Sept. 3 to 5, the air quality index (AQI) averaged in the unhealthy range according to Lane County Regional Air Protection Agency (LRAPA). In that range, “everyone may begin to experience some adverse health effects, and members of the sensitive groups may experience more serious effects,” according to the LRAPA website, which gives hourly air quality updates.

LRAPA spokesperson Jo Niehaus says on Sept. 5 the air moved into very unhealthy, and over that time period there was an hour or two where the AQI was in the hazardous range.

Christopher Porter is unhoused. He says of the smoky air, “There's no way to get away from it.” Porter was stuck outside in the worst of the pollution. “I need places where I can

go and be accepted hanging out a little longer,” he says, adding that having access to phones can help many unhoused get out of town and away from the bad air because they can call friends or relatives for help.

Urgent care physician Graham Kaiser says he saw a significant increase in patients with respiratory issues on Labor Day. “This time of year, normally I would see two or three cases a week, and I saw eight on Monday morning,” he says.

Kaiser says that when it's smoky, it's best to stay indoors and keep windows shut. “The best thing is air conditioning with some kind of air filter.”

Homeless populations don't have that option, so Kai-

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— WENDY CHOI, WHITE BIRD MEDICAL CLINIC

ser suggests they seek out an N95 mask — which filters 95 percent of very small particulate matter — to protect themselves. “Wearing a surgical mask or a bandana or a wet washcloth or whatever doesn't really filter the particulate out very well or at all,” he says, adding that those in need of N95 masks can pick them up from his Valley River Urgent Care clinic.

The young, the elderly and those with underlying lung disease are the most at risk of having serious reactions to the smoke. Additionally, Kaiser says, “it's best not to be exercising, because when you're exercising you're using twenty times as much oxygen or air than you normally would at rest.”

Thomas Berry was stuck outside due to homelessness when the smoke was hanging heavy in the air. “It gave me heartburn really bad; cigarettes do it, too,” he says. “That much smoke was pretty heavy on my lungs and stomach. I got more on my nasal passages than my throat. I tried to breathe through my nose.”

This summer has been a bad one for toxic air. In August, the LRAPA reported nine days with on-average unhealthy air quality in the Eugene/Springfield area.

In that same month, “PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend in Springfield's emergency department admitted 157 patients reporting shortness of breath,” according to Sarah Allen at PeaceHealth. “For comparison, we admitted only 57 patients the previous month with similar conditions.” Early September had days with worse air quality than any day in August.

In response to the dangerously toxic air, White Bird is also providing free N95 masks to those in need. Choi points out that “having the face mask appropriately fitted” is key to getting actual lung protection.

At the Eugene Service Station, a St. Vincent de Paul day room providing resources to the homeless, program manager Keith Heath says, “If it comes back I would suggest that they go get a mask and then seek refuge here. We're open from 8 in the morning to 5 in the evening.”

Paul Neville, public relations director at St. Vincent De Paul, which also administers the Egan Warming Centers, says that “I see people who are just exhausted and drained. Their life is a physical one, they take everything with them in backpacks.”

Heath says the Egan Warming Centers volunteer crew is prepared to open a night shelter using Egan resources if the air quality gets unhealthy again. Egan volunteers were on standby over the weekend and trained volunteers may be called on again to aid the unhoused during the shelter's off-season. ■

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