

Now Is the Time to Take Care of Your Lungs. Here's How.

By Zoë Schlanger March 27, 2020



A doctor examined a C.T. scan in a temporary coronavirus hospital in Wuhan, China, this month. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

If you are one of the millions of Americans breathing polluted air, you may be at a greater risk of catching the coronavirus and of having a more severe infection.

The reasons are twofold. First, air pollution can cause or aggravate respiratory illnesses like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. And those illnesses can make you [more susceptible to the worst effects of](#)

[lung infections](#). Second, exposure to air pollution is known to raise the chance of contracting viruses in the first place, regardless of underlying health conditions.

“Increased pollution increases susceptibility to infection,” said Dr. Meredith McCormack, a spokeswoman for the American Lung Association and associate professor of pulmonary and critical care at Johns Hopkins University. “All things being equal, a person exposed to air pollution would likely have a worse outcome if they were exposed to coronavirus.”

Air pollution has dropped off sharply in many parts of the world recently, as businesses shut down and people stay home to avoid spreading the virus. Dr. McCormack said that was great for reducing hospitalizations from acute exposure to bad air, which can happen when a region’s pollution levels suddenly spikes.



Traffic and Pollution Plummet as U.S. Cities Shut Down for Coronavirus

[A satellite that detects pollution linked to cars and trucks shows declines over major metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York.](#)

But, she noted, “even in the setting of this pandemic, there will still remain areas of high exposure.” Power plants and refineries, for example, are considered essential and are unlikely to close. Moreover, even if pollution is down for now, chronic exposure can’t be mended so quickly. For a person living with daily pollution exposure, the damage to their respiratory and immune system is done.

Exposure to chronic air pollution is often linked to race and poverty. In the United States, people of color are much more likely to live in a place with poor air quality. And [toxic pollution sites are usually close to low-income neighborhoods](#). Around 18 million people whose incomes meet the federal definition for poverty [live in areas with some of the worst air quality in the country](#).

That’s the bad news. The good news is, while exposure to outdoor air pollution is often out of our hands, that’s less true of indoor air pollution. And, even though you might not expect it, indoor air can sometimes be worse than outdoor air.

Now that many of us are cooped up at home, indoor air quality is even more important.

Dr. McCormack, who is currently treating patients with Covid-19, stressed the importance of avoiding secondhand smoke indoors — and if you smoke, trying to quit.

"If you have a smoker in the home the particulate matter could be much higher indoors than outdoors," she said. If you smoke and you can't quit, do everything you can to avoid exposing other people to your smoke, like stepping outside. The same goes for people who vape.

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Frying foods or cooking without good ventilation can also increase indoor air pollution. Nitrogen oxides from gas stoves are a known respiratory irritant, as is the fine particulate matter that is [most likely wafting off your roasts](#). You should turn on the ventilation hood above your stove and open windows if you can.

One caveat: For people living in proximity to major sources of pollution, opening a window might not be a good idea. That's where an air purifier might be worth the investment if you can afford it.

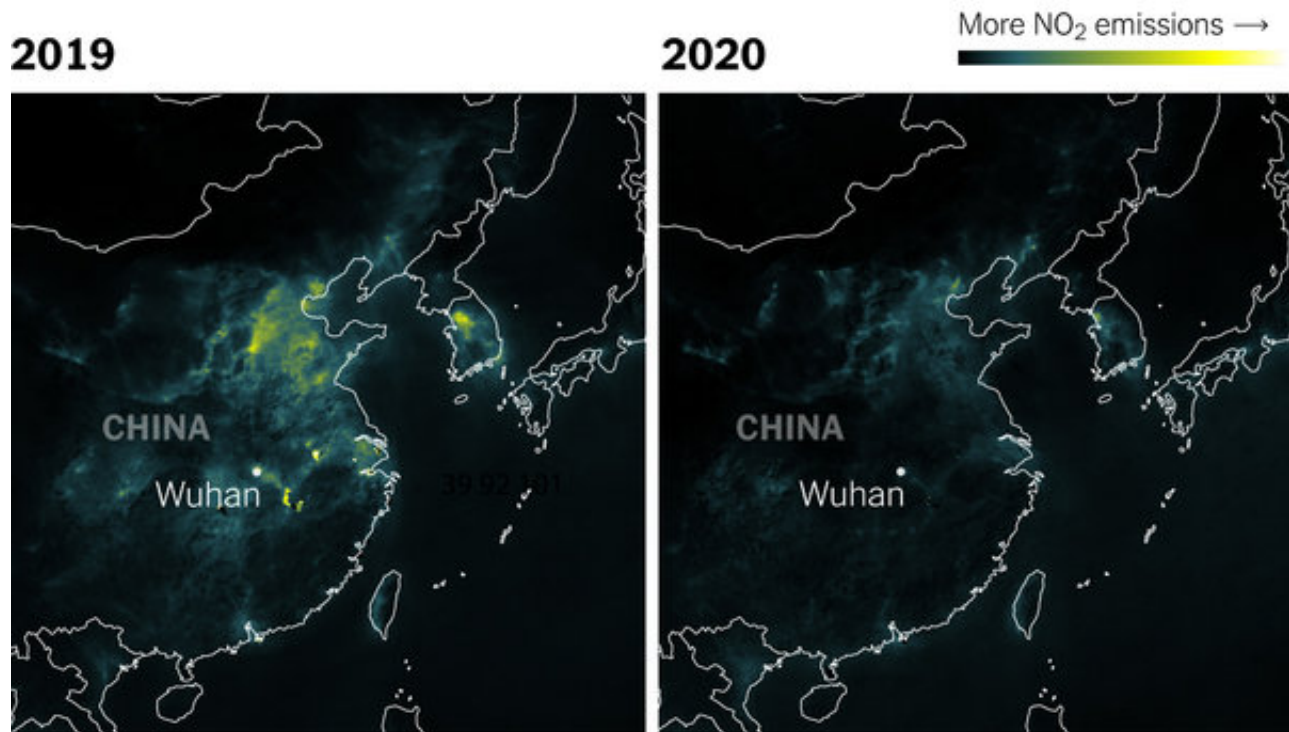
It's important to think about allergens, too. If you smell anything musty around your home, you should investigate. "Mold aggravates asthma," Dr. McCormack said. "This might be the time to address a damp spot or water damage problems."

This might also be the time to pest-proof your home. Mice and cockroaches can provoke asthma. Dr. McCormack suggested filling cracks around the house that might let in pests and taking care to properly store food that might entice them.

Finally, if you're taking maintenance medication for asthma, like an inhaler, don't forget to use it. "Remembering to take it can be challenging, particularly at a time like this when we aren't in the same routines," Dr. McCormack said. But it's an important step to protect yourself, particularly

now.

"With indoor pollution, we have a lot of control over more aspects of our exposure," Dr. McCormack said. "In addition to a source of risk, it's a source of opportunity. It's a good time to change habits."



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[A satellite that detects pollution from human activity shows how the coronavirus is shutting down whole countries.](#)