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California Fires: Tips to Protect Your Lungs

(October 26, 2007)—The American Lung Association offers the following lung health tips and information about clean-up protection to residents affected by current fires throughout the state. People with respiratory problems such as asthma, emphysema and bronchitis should monitor their breathing and exposure to airborne matter and consult with a physician immediately, should problems develop.

General Recommendations:

People living in fire-stricken areas should remain indoors and avoid inhalation of smoke, ashes and particulate matter in the air.

It is recommended that people in the immediate and surrounding areas of the fires refrain from exercising outdoors; particularly if they smell smoke or notice eye or throat irritation.

When driving your car through smoky areas, keep your windows and air vents closed. Air conditioning should only be operated in the "recirculate" setting.

People with respiratory problems, including asthma, emphysema and bronchitis, who live in immediate and surrounding areas of fires should:

Stay indoors as much as possible, with doors, windows and fireplace dampers shut and preferably with clean air circulating through air conditioners and/or air cleaners and purifiers. Use air conditioners on the recirculation setting so outside air will not be moved into the room.

If outdoor trips in smoky areas are necessary, breathe through a damp cloth to help filter out particles in the air.

People with asthma should optimize their use of medication during this time and be sure to have medication(s) (pills, inhalers) available in case of asthma attacks, and should consult with their physicians regarding appropriate dosages for asthma prevention.

People using oxygen should not adjust their level of intake before consulting their physicians.

If pulmonary symptoms are not relieved by usual medicines, seek medical attention. Symptoms to watch for are: wheezing; shortness of breath; difficulty taking a full breath; chest heaviness; light headedness and dizziness.

If you develop a persistent cough, or difficult or painful breathing, contact your physician. It is important to be aware that the onset of symptoms can appear as late as 24 to 48 hours after exposure and that smoke can remain in areas for many days after the fires have ended.

In relation to clean up, residents and volunteers should keep the following in mind, as the clean-up process involves ashes and other particulates:

People with lung or heart problems should avoid clean-up activities and areas where dust or soot is present.

Thoroughly wet dusty and sooty areas prior to clean-up. This will help to reduce the amount of particles becoming airborne.

Wear an appropriate dust mask during clean-up.

If exposure to asbestos or other hazardous materials are suspected, do not disturb the area. Dust masks do not protect against asbestos.

For free information about lung health, call the American Lung Association, toll-free, at 1 (800) LUNG-USA, which will automatically connect you with your local American Lung Association office.

About the American Lung Association

Beginning our second century, the American Lung Association is the leading organization working to prevent lung disease and promote lung health. Lung disease death rates continue to increase while other leading causes of death have declined. The American Lung Association funds vital research on the causes of and treatments for lung disease. With the generous support of the public, the American Lung Association is "*Improving life, one breath at a time.*" For more information about the American Lung Association or to support the work it does, call 1-800-LUNG-USA (1-800-586-4872) or log on to www.lungusa.org.

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