

Air Pollution and Health: Briefing sheet for healthcare professionals

Supporting people to breathe clean air is a clinical issue – and healthcare professionals can make a difference

Why air pollution matters

Air pollution is one of the most significant preventable public health threats in the UK and is linked to around 30,000 deaths each year in the UK¹.

Both outdoor air pollution (for example from traffic emissions) and indoor air pollution (for example from damp and mould, cooking, wood burning, and cleaning products) contribute to disease burden.

Short-term exposure can cause headaches, eye irritation and airway inflammation, and can trigger flare-ups or emergency admissions for people with asthma or heart conditions. Long-term exposure damages heart and lung health, affects brain function and increases the risk of dementia, cancer and early death.

Air pollution and NHS priorities

The NHS 10 Year Health Plan places prevention at the heart of healthcare and sets out a shift from treating sickness to preventing illness. It also promotes a neighbourhood health approach, bringing together NHS organisations, local authorities and community partners to improve population health and reduce health inequalities.

Raising awareness of air pollution and supporting people to reduce their exposure is an important part of preventing illness and helping people stay healthier for longer. It is a practical example of how healthcare professionals can contribute to prevention through routine conversations with patients.

How you can help

Air pollution is a modifiable health risk. As with smoking, obesity or physical inactivity, healthcare professionals have an important role in prevention through awareness raising and advocacy for simple actions.

You are highly trusted and have a valuable opportunity to have face-to-face conversations as part of existing interactions with patients.

That is why we are asking for your support using a Very Brief Advice (VBA) approach. This is a simple, evidence-based approach widely used across the NHS for smoking cessation and adapted for air pollution.

It can take as little as 30 seconds and can be delivered opportunistically during routine consultations.

The Very Brief Advice approach

It follows three simple steps: Ask. Advise. Act.

1. Ask

Ask if patients are aware of air pollution or specific exposure risks, including how they travel, their housing conditions and practices around the home.

For example:

- "Are you aware of how everyday activities at home can affect air quality?"
- "Do you know that exposure to road traffic can affect health?"
- "Have you ever thought about how air quality can affect health in the short and long term?"
- "Do traffic, smoke, or indoor air quality seem to affect your symptoms?"

2. Advise

Explain that air pollution can be harmful and why it matters for their health. Tailor advice to their condition where relevant.

For example:

- "Poor air quality can worsen breathing problems and trigger flare-ups."
- "Air pollution can affect heart, lung and brain health, so reducing exposure can help protect your wellbeing."
- "Because of your (as applicable: asthma/heart condition/being pregnant etc.), reducing exposure to air pollution may help reduce risks to your health."

3. Act

Offer simple practical steps to reduce exposure and signpost to further information and resources.

For example:

- “Simple steps like avoiding busy roads can help lower exposure.”
- “Opening windows when cooking, showering, drying clothes or doing DIY can help to reduce the build-up of harmful particles and gases.”
- “You can use the Met Office app to check local air quality forecasts”
- “There’s more information in this leaflet, and you can visit the Essex Air/Healthy Suffolk website or scan the QR code for practical tips.”

Even one short conversation can help encourage people to take action to improve the air that they and their families breathe.

Simple steps healthcare professionals can promote

To reduce exposure when out and about:

- Keep vehicle windows closed in traffic.
- Choose walking and cycling routes away from busy roads.
- Switch off your engine when parked or waiting.
- Exercise early or later in the day when pollution levels are often lower.
- Children in prams and wheelchair users are closer to exhaust fumes – take extra care.
- Check air quality forecasts to help plan when to spend time outdoors.

To reduce exposure when at home:

- Tackle damp and mould.
- Keep your home well ventilated – open windows or use an extractor fan when cooking, showering, drying clothes or doing DIY.
- Cut down use of scented aerosols, sprays, air fresheners and cleaning products.
- Avoid smoking or vaping and burning candles or incense inside your home.
- Keep lids on pans when cooking.
- Wood burners and open fires create harmful pollution – reduce use where possible. Choose Ready to Burn certified fuel or properly seasoned wood, and avoid burning coal, paper or plastic.

Key messages for you to share

- Air pollution affects health – both short and long term
- Everyone is affected, but some groups are more vulnerable
- There are simple steps people can take to reduce exposure

Making conversations effective

Here are some principles to consider when giving VBA:

- Be patient-centred
- Tailor advice to social and economic realities
- Avoid blame or alarmism
- Focus on achievable steps
- Be inclusive and culturally sensitive
- Link air quality advice to existing condition management
- Signpost to resources and sources of additional information

Priority patient groups to target

Breathing polluted air affects everyone. It is especially harmful to children, older adults, pregnant women, and people with existing lung, heart or other health conditions. These opportunities may therefore be especially relevant:

- Asthma and COPD reviews
- Cardiovascular disease management
- Antenatal care
- Child health and paediatric clinics
- Diabetes reviews
- Occupational health consultations
- Older adults and frailty services
- Housing-related health concerns

Further information

These resources are designed to help you integrate air pollution conversations into your routine care and support patients with practical steps to reduce their exposure:

Visit www.essexair.org.uk/air-quality-advice or www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/air-quality-advice to access a range of free resources for healthcare professionals, including a 5-minute introductory film, short role play videos showing the Very Brief Advice approach in practice, and downloadable patient leaflets and posters.

The Clean Air Academy provides free online training about air pollution for healthcare professionals: www.cleanairacademy.org.uk

References:

ⁱ Royal College of Physicians report: A breath of fresh air: Responding to the health challenges of modern air pollution (2025), www.rcp.ac.uk/media/hvbeolvx/21072025-update-rcp-full-report-a-breath-of-fresh-air.pdf

