

# Air Pollution and Health: FAQs for healthcare professionals

## 1. How significantly does air pollution affect health?

Air pollution is the largest environmental risk to public health. Evidence clearly links both outdoor and indoor air pollution to respiratory disease, cardiovascular disease, cancer, adverse pregnancy outcomes, poor child development, mental health effects and dementia. It is estimated to contribute to around 30,000 deaths each year in the UK.

## 2. Why should healthcare professionals discuss air pollution with patients?

Air pollution is a major, preventable contributor to disease and premature death. Healthcare professionals are trusted sources and well placed to provide brief interventions during existing interactions with patients. For example, as part of reviews of respiratory and cardiovascular conditions, diabetes or antenatal and child health appointments.

## 3. Why is air pollution relevant to current 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.

Air pollution contributes to a significant burden of preventable illness. It disproportionately affects some communities and vulnerable groups. Raising awareness of air pollution and supporting people to reduce their exposure is therefore an important part of preventing illness, improving population health and reducing health inequalities.

## 4. Which patients are most vulnerable?

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. It is also more likely to impact people living in poor housing conditions.

## 5. What is Very Brief Advice (VBA)

Very Brief Advice is a simple Ask-Advise-Act approach that helps healthcare professionals integrate air pollution prevention into routine consultations in as little as 30 seconds.

## 6. What practical advice can I give patients?

There are simple practical steps people can take to reduce their exposure to air pollution when out and about, as well as when inside the home.

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.
- 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.

## 7. How long should these conversations take?

Many can be integrated into routine appointments from as little as 30 seconds to three minutes, similar to brief awareness raising discussions and advice about smoking, healthy eating or physical activity.

## 8. How can I raise the issue without alarming patients?

It is important to use supportive, practical language and frame it as part of preventative healthcare. Avoid blame and focus on small achievable changes. Be patient centred and be sensitive to their personal circumstances.

## 9. Should I still raise air pollution if patients have limited ability to change their environment?

Yes – but conversations should be practical, supportive and sensitive to individual circumstances. While not everyone can change where they live, work or travel, many people can still take small steps to reduce exposure. Even modest improvements, such as improving ventilation, reducing indoor pollutants or using less busy streets where possible, can help protect health.

## 10. Is air pollution only a concern in urban or industrial areas?

No. While roadside and industrial emissions are important outdoor sources, air pollution can affect people in all communities. Indoor air pollution from cooking, damp, mould, heating, wood burning and poor ventilation can significantly impact health regardless of location.

## 11. Which air pollutants are most harmful to health?

Key pollutants include:

- Fine particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10)
- Nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>)
- Ozone
- Volatile organic compounds (VOCs)
- Smoke
- Damp, mould spores and indoor combustion products

These pollutants can affect both short-term and long-term health.

## 12. How does air pollution intersect with health inequalities?

Deprived communities are often exposed to worse air quality and poorer housing while also experiencing greater vulnerability due to pre-existing health conditions. This contributes to widening existing health-inequalities.

## 13. Is indoor air pollution as important as outdoor air pollution?

Yes. People spend most of their time indoors, and pollutants from cooking, heating, mould, chemicals and smoke (tobacco, candles and incense) can significantly impact health. Sometimes indoor air can be more polluted than outdoor air.

## 14. Who has developed this work?

This programme has been developed collaboratively by NHS and local government organisations across Essex and Suffolk. The partnership includes:

- East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust (ESNEFT)
- NHS Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB)
- NHS Norfolk and Suffolk Integrated Care Board (ICB)
- Suffolk County Council
- Essex County Council
- Colchester City Council

It is funded by Suffolk County Council, and Colchester City Council with a grant from Defra.

## 14. Where can I find further resources and training?

Healthcare professionals can access free resources including an introductory campaign film, role play consultation films and a leaflet and poster for public and patient audiences at [www.essexair.org.uk/air-quality-advice](http://www.essexair.org.uk/air-quality-advice) and [www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/air-quality-advice](http://www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/air-quality-advice). There is also free online training at [www.cleanairacademy.org.uk](http://www.cleanairacademy.org.uk)

