

Sydney smoke is infiltrating homes and it may be just as hazardous to stay indoors

By [Mridula Amin](#)

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PHOTO: [People have been stocking up on face masks as the smoke shows no sign of abating.](#) (AAP: Joel Carrett)

Face masks, "hazardous" air quality warnings and poor visibility — it's a new norm in the Harbour City this summer that has the NSW Government warning people to stay indoors.

But as smoke shrouds the city, many Sydneysiders are likely unaware the air quality in their homes and offices could be just as harmful as it is outdoors.

In certain parts of the city, the air quality has been so bad in the past month its been akin to smoking between four and 10 cigarettes.

The hazardous smoke even bumped Sydney up to ninth place for the worst air quality in the world.

Key points:

- Most Australian homes do not adequately protect from the impacts of outside smoke
- Only filtration can improve air quality inside
- One expert wants sealed air quality refuges built for those with health complications from smoke

Hospital presentations for respiratory problems have increased in recent weeks and sporting match cancellations have become common.



PHOTO: [It's been weeks since the Sydney CBD has been clearly visible.](#) (AAP: Neil Bennett)

But the director of the International Laboratory for Air Quality and Health, Lidia Morawska, said most Australian homes offered little protection from the negative effects of smoke.

"A normal Australian house would normally ventilate by just opening the windows, same with schools," she said.

Professor Morawska said there was little difference in the concentrations of pollutants whether the windows were open or shut.

"Even with the windows closed, the difference in air quality could be ... at most 10 to 25 per cent less concentrated."

She said minuscule particles in smoke could easily travel through structural leaks or cracks in buildings.

And once they are inside, only filtration can improve the air quality.

Structures that are significantly more protected include modern office buildings and shopping centres because they have air filtration systems.

"We're all compromised. There's no studies that show any particular duration of exposure is safer than 24 hours exposure," Professor Morawska said.

Guys Marks from the University of NSW said the State Government should be considering building sealed air quality refuges where people can go in severe air pollution events.

"I think it's worth exploring, especially for people who are sensitive to the effects of low air quality," he said.

Professor Morawska, from Queensland University of Technology, said rooms did not have to look smoky, or smell pungent, to be compromised.

Even though people might feel safe when they walk through the front door, she said scientific tests were often the only way to tell how dangerous an environment was.

"You can't tell. You get a false perception of false protection," she said.

She said that people become accustomed to the smell outside, so coming into an area with slightly less of a smoky smell can lull people into a false sense of security.

"If they're outside people can see that there is smoke haze, inside the interiors are much smaller they don't see that there's low visibility."

PHOTO: [Vets have warned some dogs may have health problems if constantly outside in the smoke.](#) (Instagram: torbytorbs)



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