

Frequently Asked Questions

Are school districts required (under a law) to use the air quality guidance?

- » No. The air quality guidance was developed as a set of guidelines. It is not a law, mandate or policy. It was designed to help schools use air quality information when deciding whether to restrict outdoor physical activities. School districts have varying policies with regard to using the guidance. Some decisions are made by school principals while others are made at the district level.

What is PM2.5?

- » Particulate matter (PM) refers to very small dust and soot particles. PM2.5 is the term used for particulate matter that is 2.5 micrometers or smaller in size and is expressed in ug/m^3 concentrations. This is so small that several thousand of them could fit on the period at the end of this sentence. Sources of PM2.5 include fuel combustion from automobiles, power plants, wood burning, industrial processes, and diesel powered vehicles. The highest levels of PM2.5 usually occur during the winter months.

Why was the air quality guidance changed?

- » Changes were made to the guidance based on new science and experience. The new guidance offers three improvements: 1) It aligns with recommendations from the new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Air Standard for PM2.5; 2) It allows greater flexibility in allowing healthy students to benefit from outdoor exercise; and 3) It provides a conservative level of protection when outdoor activities are not recommended for all students. Specifically,
 - Sensitive students will be offered indoor physical activity when PM2.5 levels reach $35 \text{ ug}/\text{m}^3$ (previously $40 \text{ ug}/\text{m}^3$).
 - An intermediate category, $55.5 \text{ ug}/\text{m}^3 - 90 \text{ ug}/\text{m}^3$, advises sensitive students and other students with respiratory symptoms (e.g., chest cold) to stay indoors while otherwise healthy students may play outside.
 - Indoor physical activity is recommended for all students when air pollution levels exceed $90 \text{ ug}/\text{m}^3$, which is more protective than the general EPA health advisory (which recommends avoidance of outdoor exercise at levels above $210 \text{ ug}/\text{m}^3$).
- » Data collected by the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) and Utah Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) over the last three years has shown these changes to be protective while taking into account the benefits of outdoor exercise. Feedback from school administrators was taken into account to ensure the new guidance could be reasonably implemented.

What do I do if I have a “sensitive” student?

- » Parents, with the advice of their health care provider, should inform their school if they believe their child is part of a “sensitive” group who should have limited outdoor physical activity when the air quality is poor. Visit www.health.utah.gov/asthma for a sample letter for parents.

How can a student with asthma (or other respiratory disease) be allowed to stay indoors during recess on poor air quality days?

- » It is the responsibility of the parent/guardian to contact the school nurse and school administration to communicate their student’s health needs. Some schools may require the parent/guardian to complete a health plan so school officials know when to keep the child indoors.

Frequently Asked Questions

Where can I check the daily air quality?

- » Air quality conditions are monitored at various sites throughout the state. To check the current PM2.5 levels, visit www.airquality.utah.gov and click on “current conditions.”

What school districts or schools have air quality policies?

- » Not all school districts are affected by air quality. Generally, only those with access to results of air monitoring stations in their areas are able to apply the guidance. These areas include Cache, Davis, Salt Lake, Utah and Weber counties.

What is the difference between health advisories and air action days (“burn days”)?

- » The air quality standard (35 ug/m^3) is the threshold set by the EPA that requires states to impose certain pollution control regulations if exceeded. When pollution levels are between 25 and 35 ug/m^3 , a “yellow” air action alert is issued to encourage people to keep pollution levels below the standard. A “red” air action alert is issued when pollution levels are higher than the standard.
- » Health advisories provide the public with precautionary steps that may need to be taken if air pollution levels rise above the health standard. Health advisories fall into five categories according to worsening levels of pollution. As the pollution level increases, the health advisories become more restrictive in limiting prolonged or heavy exertion outdoors.

Is the air inside schools really better than the air outside?

- » Yes. Three studies that address indoor versus outdoor air quality have been completed at two Utah elementary schools.
- » The first and second studies were done at Hawthorne Elementary in Salt Lake City, Utah from December 2004 – February 2005 and then again from December 2005 – February 2006. Results showed indoor air quality is significantly better than outdoor air quality.
- » The third study was done at Greenville Elementary in North Logan, Utah from September 2006 – April 2007. Results showed a 70% drop in PM2.5 levels inside the school versus outside on high pollution days. Additional studies at other Cache County schools confirm these results.

What can be done to improve the air quality near schools?

- » Reducing driving and bus idling on worsening air quality days may help. For information on bus idling reduction programs visit <http://epa.gov/cleanschoolbus/index> or visit www.cleanair.utah.gov for tips on how to improve the air quality in your community.

Is the air quality guidance only for schools?

- » Yes. The guidance was developed for schools and local health departments to help in decision-making about outdoor recess. However, the guidance is based on national and Utah-specific research and can be useful for anyone with asthma or other respiratory diseases.

For more information visit the Utah Department of Health Asthma Program at www.health.utah.gov/asthma.

Updated January 8, 2008