

How to Stay Healthy When it's Hazy

Your health and fitness shouldn't take a backseat when the skies start to suffocate you. With the help of experts, *MH* clears the air (well, not literally) about what you can and can't do during the haze



IT CREATES HEADLINES, SPEWS

forth urban legends, and even ignites international political drama.

The haze has, for us, in this part of Southeast Asia, become as seasonal as snow in Canada, and as depressing as coral bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef. We can gripe about it on Facebook till the cows come home, but you're still gonna see a brown sky when you look out the window.

One thing's for sure, though: the haze should not stop you from achieving your fitness goals; much less deteriorate your health. Just like how folks can stay fit when it's freezing outside, so too can we stay healthy when it's hazy. We asked Dr. Raymond George Varughese, Consultant Physician from Columbia Asia Hospitals, and Dr. Jamalul Azizi Abdul Rahaman, Head of Pulmonology Services from the Ministry of Health, to explain the facts and to debunk the myths on those pesky particles clogging up the clouds, so that you can still live and breathe health and fitness despite the haze.

1

Understand what haze is

Haze is a mixture of excessive smoke, dust, moisture and vapour particles suspended in the air. It reduces visibility and is able to penetrate deep into the lungs, as it contains air pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide. Haze can cause difficulties in breathing, as well as aggravate asthma and other respiratory symptoms. The lungs are the part of your body most affected by haze.

2

Know what haze does to your health

Dr. Rahaman likens the health effects of haze to “being exposed to a chimney or a burning barbecue pit”. It can cause headaches, dizziness, conjunctivitis, eye inflammation, runny noses, sore throats and coughs, not to mention worsening the health of people with existing conditions such as sinus allergies, bronchial asthma and acute bronchitis. In fact, long-term exposure to haze is linked to chronic bronchitis and could worsen existing heart disease, according to Dr. Varughese.

3

Don't panic (if the API reading is below 200)

Both Dr. Rahaman and Dr. Varughese say you'll be fine if you have to go outside for a short while if the Air Pollutant Index (API) reading is below 200 and if you have no pre-existing health conditions. You don't need to wear a mask, but there's no harm in wearing one or covering your nose with a damp handkerchief. Feel free to run outdoors if the reading is below 100, but scale it back if it's between 101 and 200. Once it's more than 201, stay indoors when you exercise.

4

Use N95 masks only

They're expensive, but they actually work: N95 masks properly filter particle pollutants 0.1 to 0.3 microns in size, and have an efficiency rate of 95 percent. But before you empty your wallet on some three-for-two deal, check the mask to ensure its size matches your nose and mouth area. “Wearing a mask could cause tiredness, headaches or discomfort in breathing,” Dr. Rahaman says, “due to it reducing the volume of breathable air.” Unlike those flimsy paper masks, you can reuse a N95 mask, but only if it's still clean and in good condition. But don't share them, please and thank you.

5

Practise common sense

Difficult as it will be to admit, your mum was right. All you need to do to stay healthy during the haze season is to drink lots of water (“to expel toxins from the body,” says Dr. Rahaman); eat lots of fruit and vegetables (to prevent a runny nose or a sore throat, according to Dr. Rahaman); and get eight hours of sleep. If you have any chronic health conditions, keep up with your meds and make an appointment with your doctor if you're unsure about anything. “Last but not least,” Dr. Rahaman advises, “wash your hands and face regularly to remove the toxic residue from the haze.”

6

Ignore the doctors at your peril

We understand if running is life for some of you, and that you'd rather die if you don't clock up the kilometres every week. But doctors are too polite to tell you how to live your life, so we will: don't exercise outdoors if the haze is severe, i.e. above 200, because you'd essentially be taking in large volumes of haze with all that strenuous physical activity going on. But if you're more stubborn than an ox and still want to run outside, drink plenty of water as soon as you're back inside to help your kidneys flush out the toxins. Also, invest in an air purifier for your home. Hey, you're the one who's going against medical advice.

7

Protect yourself against the elements

Are you *really* going to run in the haze? *Wow*. Okay, then the least that you can do is invest in the best running gear that will reduce your exposure. Daniel Yew, co-founder of the Run 89 Crew, advises you to wear sunglasses made for sport, as they will protect your eyes entirely and prevent slippage due to sweat. A good pair of shoes with a lot of traction on the outsole (like the new Nike Pegasus 33, Yew's favourite) also helps you forget about the haze. “Try your best to focus on beating your time and make it to the finishing line,” Yew says. “Filter everything out and focus only on the run.”

8

Correct the myths floating around

This could easily pass as sound advice, but Dr. Rahaman says that not everybody needs to wear a mask all the time, because it really depends on your health and how severe the haze is. But the biggest myth he'd like to debunk is that “haze causes asthma” – patently untrue. “The increased levels of pollutants in the air may trigger asthma attacks or cause asthma to worsen,” he says, “but ultimately, it's believed that asthma is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors.” Dr. Rahaman also notes that haze makes life difficult for people with asthma and other respiratory problems, even if they wear masks; thus, he urges them to take extra precautions and manage their condition properly through medication during the haze.

9

Don't be a hero

The long and short of haze? It's safe to walk to and from your car, to take out the rubbish, or to walk your dog; and it's unlikely that you'll be struck by a serious illness if you're outdoors for a short while. However, you shouldn't be an idiot and tempt fate with 21km runs if the API reading is above 201. “Some people may be less susceptible to respiratory infections, but even if they're not affected by the haze outwardly, it's still not advisable to be exposed to it for a prolonged period,” Dr. Rahaman says. “The pollutants in the air can go deep into the lungs, and in some cases, enter the bloodstream.” So, stay hydrated, ensure you have plenty of meds if you have a chronic lung condition, and try your best to avoid cabin fever if cloud seeding fails.