Recent headlines from around the country drew attention to New York, much of the Northeast and Midwest as large plumes of smoke from Canadian wildfires blackened thousands of miles of skies. Many communities across the west viewed this from afar with sympathy, as this mirrors recent experience across western states.

Millions of people were now subject to potentially dangerous outdoor air and forced inside. Were these cities and towns better protected as a result? What were individuals breathing while inside? Was indoor air quality any better?

On average, Americans spend nearly 90% of their time inside. Until the last few years, not a lot of attention has been given to indoor air quality – whether from the public or government. However, this has changed recently with a huge spotlight on just how safe is the air we breathe. The [WHO](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/household-air-pollution-and-health#:~:text=The%20combined%20effects%20of%20ambient,(COPD)%20and%20lung%20cancer.) associates more than six million premature deaths to the combined effects of ambient air pollution and household air pollution, with approximately three million of those coming from household air pollution.

Medical experts hope that increased awareness of the combined effects of wildfire smoke and the pandemic will lead to more focus on indoor air quality. After all we have done as a society to use engineering controls to maximize safe drinking water, we need to turn our attention to protecting our indoor air for all.

There is still a long way to go to create the urgency needed for societal change, but we can implement some of these as a best practice now.

On a small scale, increasing ventilation can be as simple as opening a window or opening your fresh air intake for each of your HVAC units. This will help mitigate infectious disease outbreaks by diluting potentially infectious material with as much fresh air as possible. If you are housing a Covid+ patient, then the use of a HEPA rated portable air cleaner is required in each room per Cal/OSHA.

Filtration of the air through mechanical means will be limited by your existing systems, so it is important to understand the capabilities. If your equipment cannot handle a MERV rating of 13 or higher, then you will need to consider stand-alone air cleaners to supplement your existing system in order to effectively filter the air from indoor air pollution. In the case of outdoor air pollution or wildfire smoke, it is important to understand that all fresh air intakes and windows should be closed, so it is critical to have those stand-alone options to filter the air.

Some scientists and legislators are calling for new laws as it relates to better indoor air management. Late last year, the White House held a [summit on indoor air quality](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/readout-of-the-white-house-summit-on-improving-indoor-air-quality/) and released a briefing explaining the steps the administration is taking to address the issues highlighted in the summit. [CAHF](https://www.cahfdisasterprep.com/pandemic) and [CDPH](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/EPO/CDPH%20Document%20Library/EOM%20Documents/Wildfire-Smoke-Considerations-CA-PHO_08-2022.pdf) have put together guides and toolkits to help meet these goals.

As we stand on the precipice of potential changes to building codes and standards, we should understand that healthy buildings are associated with less worker absenteeism due to illness and better cognitive function, both of which mean that an investment in improving indoor air quality generally means an investment in your bottom line. If these measures benefit our staff and workplace just think of how impactful this can be for your residents.