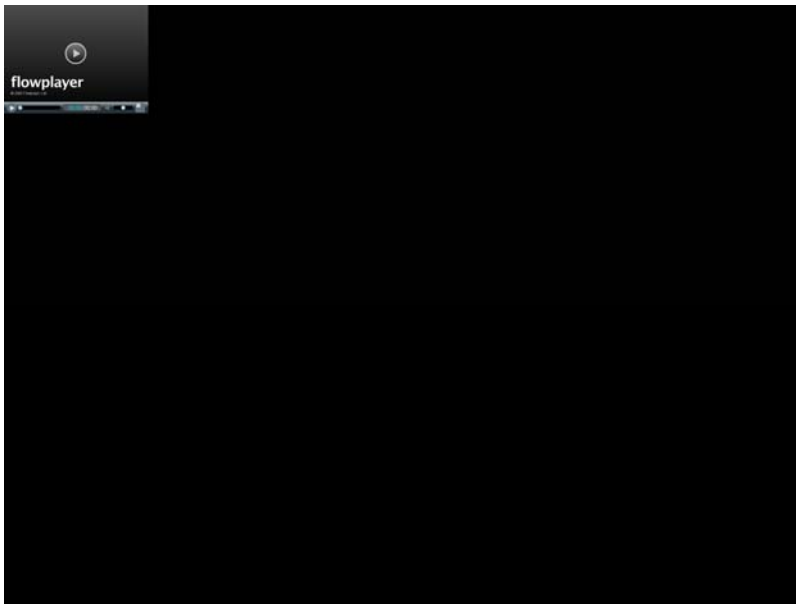


Smoky conditions lead to health concerns

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LEE COUNTY, Fla. - It was obvious across Southwest Florida Wednesday: smoke from brush fires settling over the area.

Kurt Goerke of the American Lung Association says the danger comes from what you can't really see.

"If you can smell the smoke, the particulate matter is in the air for sure," Goerke said. "The smallest particulate matter is the stuff you can breathe furthest into your lungs."

The smoky conditions can present the most problems for kids, seniors, and those who already have breathing problems.

"It mostly affects people who have chronic ailments, especially respiratory

ailments like asthma and COPD," said Diane Holm with the Lee County Department of Health. "It also affects people with heart disease."

Health officials say to limit exposure: stay indoors with air conditioning, and try to limit vigorous outdoor activity.

Other common protection plans don't necessarily work.

"The particles that do the most damage will pass right through (a face mask). So its not the protection people think they're getting. Then because people think they're protected, they might expose for longer than they would," Goerke said.

Southwest Florida usually rates excellent for air quality; Lee and Collier counties recently tied for least polluted ozone in the state. Officials say smoky occasions like these are rare, but shouldn't be ignored.

"Its not a 'sky is falling' type situation for most of us, but there are people that need to be aware of what's going on," Goerke said.