

Frequently Asked Questions

Air Quality and Health Outcomes Dashboard

1. What do the data mean? What can they tell us (or not tell us) about air quality-related health outcomes in Oregon?

This dashboard shows emergency room and urgent care visits in Oregon, along with daily air quality data (measured in PM2.5, small particles of pollution that can be inhaled into the lungs). The data cover 2020 through the most recent week.

Some health issues may be linked to poor air quality. However, when and how much PM2.5 levels and healthcare visits increase does not always mean one causes the other. In some cases, more people may seek care after air quality gets worse, or for reasons not related to air quality.

2. What does “non-infectious” respiratory illness mean?

Non-infectious respiratory illnesses are health problems that can get worse when air quality is poor. The data shown here come from the [National Syndromic Surveillance Program \(NSSP\) Electronic Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-based Epidemics \(ESSENCE\)](#), a system that looks for certain words and medical codes related to these illnesses. This includes long-term conditions like asthma and COPD, and symptoms such as wheezing and shortness of breath.

Although these illnesses may be affected by poor air, the system does not search directly for air quality terms. It focuses on the illnesses themselves.

3. What does it mean when visits are “above expected levels”?

When visit rates are “above expected levels”, it means that there are more emergency room or urgent care visits than usual, based on historical data in NSSP ESSENCE.

Alerts of visits above expected levels help public health experts know when to take a closer look. However, an alert does not always mean there is a serious public health problem – it simply signals that a specific trend or pattern may require closer review.

4. How can public health professionals use the information presented on this dashboard?

These data can help public health experts watch for changes over time, share important messages, and respond to extreme environmental events like wildfires. Some ways the data may be used include:

- Looking at current or past PM2.5 levels and comparing them to trends in asthma, non-infectious respiratory, or mental health visits. If there is a sudden and lasting increase in PM2.5 or healthcare visits, it may be a sign that more investigation is needed;
- Sharing public health messages based on patterns in certain areas or among specific groups of people;
- Helping guide air quality warnings during events like wildfires, or reviewing past PM2.5 levels and health impacts from earlier wildfire seasons.

5. How can the public use the information presented on this dashboard?

These data can help the public better understand how air quality and health trends are connected. This information may support personal decisions about staying healthy. Some ways the data may be used include:

- Looking at current or past PM2.5 levels and comparing them to health visits. If there is a sudden and lasting increase in PM2.5 or health visits, people may choose to take steps like staying indoors or talking to a doctor;
- Tracking at what times of year PM2.5 levels or health visits are higher in certain places or among certain groups. This can help people get ready for possible health impacts.

