

Toxic fumes can cause acute respiratory distress, say experts

20 July 2020 - A city pulmonologist says the impact of the dump fire will linger long after the fire is extinguished as the toxic fumes released into the atmosphere will have adverse effects on smokers and people who suffer from chronic conditions, such as asthma, emphysema, and chronic bronchitis.



This, he predicts, will ultimately lead to an overburdening of the city's healthcare facilities and resources, which are already under stress during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The noxious fumes omitted from the burning dump are considered an environmental trigger that will exacerbate chest and breathing problems. This will be worse in patients whose condition is not well controlled, meaning they are not taking their chronic medication regularly, but even in well-controlled cases of chronic chest problems, environmental triggers, such as this dump fire, can exacerbate normal chronic chest conditions," he explained.

He said, especially during this Covid-19 pandemic, when there is an increased need to keep chests and lungs open and clear, the smoke from the dump could potentially compromise one's lung capacity.

He warned that those at risk would have to take serious decisions about ongoing exposure given that the dump fires are a regularly recurring crisis.

"Many have moved from the area because of the effects the dump fires have on their health. If you suffer from chest conditions and are affected by the fumes, unfortunately, you are at risk," said the doctor.

Groundwork Environmental Health Campaign Manager Rico Euripidou said the open burning of waste at landfill sites poses health risks to those directly exposed to the smoke and windblown ash.

"It especially affects people with compromised immune systems and those with sensitive respiratory systems, as well as young children and the elderly. In the short term, exposure to the smoke can cause headaches, nausea, and rashes. Over time, it can increase the risk of chronic health impacts, such as certain cancers and heart disease. This is because, in the landfill smoke, there are many harmful chemicals, such as heavy metals, volatile organic substances and dioxins and furans.

"The combination of the smoke and the ash after the fire will deteriorate the quality of the ambient air quality in Pietermaritzburg. I believe people directly exposed and breathing in smoke should definitely evacuate from their homes. If the smoke is not coming into their homes, then the risk is less, however, if people's homes are flooded in smoke and they experience difficulty breathing and have an acrid taste in their mouths then they should leave," he said.

AUTHOR



Jade le Roux
Journalist

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