



CABINET FOR HEALTH AND FAMILY SERVICES
Department for Community Based Services
Office of the Commissioner

Andy Beshear
Governor

275 East Main Street, 5W-A
Frankfort, KY 40621
502-564-7042
502-564-7091
www.chfs.ky.gov

Eric C. Friedlander
Secretary

Statewide News Release

Media Contact: Susan Dunlap, 502-564-6786, ext. 3437

Air Quality Warning Issued

A massive dust cloud from the Sahara Desert will reach the southern U.S. within a few days

FRANKFORT, Ky. (June 26, 2020) – On Friday, the Kentucky Department for Public Health (KDPH) Commissioner Dr. Steven Stack warned Kentuckians that air quality in the state may be poor this weekend and into next week. An enormous cloud of dry and dusty air that originated over the Sahara Desert will move across the southern United States over the next three to seven days.

“We absolutely need to be cautious this weekend and next week, [monitor the air quality index in our area](#), and if needed, limit our time outside,” said Gov. Beshear. “We’ve already shown that we can come together to fight a global pandemic for months, so I know we can take the steps needed to protect ourselves and our loved ones over one week.”

This type of dust plume, known as the Saharan Air Layer (SAL), is an annual phenomenon in the late spring, summer and early fall. It can occupy a 2-2.5 mile thick layer in the atmosphere, [according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#). However, the most recent SAL cloud, first formed on June 14, is unusually large. It is one of the thickest on record and [nearly 5,000 miles long](#). That means it could have a significant negative impact on air quality when it moves over Kentucky.

Poor air quality can aggravate those suffering from respiratory conditions such as asthma and COPD. It can also pose health risks for seniors and young children.

“Fortunately, unlike COVID-19, this is a short-term issue, and the masks most Kentuckians are already wearing will also help protect them from inhaling dust,” said Dr. Stack. “But this is still a serious risk for our youngest and oldest residents, as well as those with any respiratory issues. We need to be especially careful this weekend about spending extended time outdoors. Kentuckians should consistently check the air quality in their zip code at airnow.gov and watch for any changes in the sky’s color and visibility.”

Dust particles in the air may cause people to experience eye irritation, lung and throat irritation and trouble breathing. To help prevent health-related issues, people should review and practice the following tips to help limit exposure:

- Pay attention to local air quality reports at <https://www.airnow.gov/> and watch for news or health warnings about dust particles in your area. Pay attention to public health messages and take extra safety measures such as avoiding spending time outdoors.
- Continue to wear the protective mask you are using to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The mask will also help prevent exposure to dust particles if worn correctly.
- Keep windows and doors closed unless it is very hot outside. Run an air conditioner if you have one, but keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent dust from getting inside. Seek shelter elsewhere if you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed.
- Follow your doctor's advice about medicines and about your respiratory management plan if you have asthma or another lung disease. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

Over the upcoming days, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services and Kentucky Department for Public Health will continue to work with local and state officials to monitor the Saharan dust plume and if required, disseminate additional public health advisories and guidance to protect our fellow Kentuckians.

For more information about the Kentucky Department for Public Health, [click here](#).

Kentuckians can listen to an audio recording of this message in: [English](#), [Spanish](#), [Korean](#), [Japanese](#), [French](#), [Chinese](#) and [Bosnian](#).

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The Cabinet for Health and Family Services is home to most of the state's human services and healthcare programs, including the Department for Public Health. CHFS is one of the largest agencies in state government, with nearly 8,000 full- and part-time employees located across the Commonwealth focused on improving the lives and health of Kentuckians.