

Surviving the Great Smog

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ПДК (предельно допустимая концентрация): maximum acceptable concentration (of terrifyingly dangerous toxins in the air)

We are now in Week 5 of the Heat Wave Horror, and my sartorial standards haven't just slipped — they've fallen through the floor. My hair is sticking out like Raggedy Ann's, my skin is breaking out like a teenager's, and I now wear get-ups when I go to the store that I would not, when sane, wear outside my bedroom. And you know what? I don't care. Besides, everyone else looks just like me.

Just when we think it can't get any worse — it does. In addition to temperatures that are still rising, Moscow has been blanketed by smog so thick you can't see across the street. If you want to read up on what you're breathing, here's a little primer to help you navigate the news reports on air quality.

The thick cloud hanging over the city may be called смог (smog) or дым (smoke). People also refer to гарь (cinders, ashes), most commonly heard in: Пахнет гарью (it smells like

something's burning). This is what you shout when the reptilian part of your brain wakes you up at 3 a.m. and you run outside to see if your house is on fire. Ни хрена не вижу! (I can't see a damn thing!) is what you shout when you can't see the roof of your house through the smog.

News reports describe the situation with more propriety and in greater technical detail. Видимость на дорогах столицы на данный момент не превышает 100 метров (At present, visibility on the capital's roads is less than 100 meters). Sometimes journalists dumb down the statistics into terms anyone can understand: Дым от торфяников равен двум пачкам сигарет в день (Smoke from the peat bog fires is the equivalent of smoking two packs of cigarettes a day). In other reports, they provide a more scientific description: Концентрация вредных веществ в московском воздухе сильно превышает норму (The concentration of toxins in Moscow's air significantly exceeds the norm). If you want to scare yourself silly, look for specific toxins, like угарный газ (carbon monoxide), углеводороды (hydrocarbons), диоксид азота (nitrogen dioxide), формальдегид (formaldehyde), фенол (phenol), аммиак (ammonia) and сероводород (hydrogen sulphide). There's also something called взвешенные частицы (airborne particles) that I personally don't even want to know about.

The amount of this junk in the air is described in Russian by a number of complicated acronyms. ПДК stands for предельно допустимая концентрация (maximum acceptable concentration). According to an official environmental monitoring site, if you breathe in less than this norm, you will feel fine, there won't be any long-term health damage, and you can go on to lead a long life with lots of healthy children and grandchildren. Then there's ПДКМР, which stands for предельно допустимая максимальная разовая концентрация (maximum acceptable short-term concentration). This is the maximum amount you can breathe in over 20 to 30 minutes without damaging your health.

And then there's ПДКСС, which stands for предельно допустимая среднесуточная концентрация (maximum acceptable average daily concentration). This is the amount you can breathe in over the course of a day without long-term damage to your health. When that last norm is exceeded almost 200-fold, it's time to max out your credit card and buy a package tour to the Alps.

So what are you supposed to do? I have to say I feel sorry for health inspectors. Short of ordering the evacuation of the city, they don't have much to offer. Тем, кто вынужден в утренние часы находиться на улице, рекомендуется пользоваться респираторами и марлевыми повязками. (People who must be on the street in the morning hours should wear respirators or gauze masks.)

Other recommendations include: побольше пить, пользоваться кондиционерами и отложить трудные дела (Drink more fluids, use an air conditioner and put off difficult tasks). Принимать витамины, особенно витамин Е (Take vitamins, especially Vitamin E). The chief health inspector is more adamant: Минимум физической активности! (Minimal physical effort!)

I'm going to apply minimal physical effort to type in my search engine: cheap air tickets Moscow mountain resort.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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