

Muscovites' Inalienable Right to Have Clean Air

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Gray, toxic smog from peat bog fires blanketed Moscow and many other Russian cities for several weeks with little interruption. It is particularly difficult for Muscovites and residents of other large cities because the pungent, eye- and lung-burning smog was combined with the normal presence of automobile exhaust fumes and industrial emissions, creating a dangerous, poisonous mix of carbon monoxide, soot and resin that millions of people were forced to inhale.

The sharp deficit of oxygen in the air has led to complaints from millions of Muscovites of exhaustion, a drop in alertness, nausea and headaches. The blogosphere is full of messages from highly stressed residents asking other Internet users: "Where can I send my children and elderly parents to escape the smog? Does wearing a mask help at all? How much have my chances of getting lung cancer increased now?"

Meanwhile, the country's top public doctor, Gennady Onishchenko, said Monday that the

smog has not had a major negative impact on Moscow's environment. "There is no radical worsening in the situation —

except during certain hours of the day and in certain districts of the city where the level of hazardous particles in the air may have increased," he said.

Most Moscow city authorities have also tried to play down the danger. In an eerie way, bureaucrats issued standard, sterile phrases that citizens should protect themselves from the smog by wearing face masks that are saturated with water, avoid jogging in the morning, take several showers a day and to stay home. Perhaps the calmest of all Moscow officials was Mayor Yury Luzhkov, who spent most of the smog-filled days on vacation in Europe, although he swears that he was in full control of the situation.

Despite the official calmness, independent experts say the level of hazardous particles have exceeded the maximum acceptable level by six times across the board for all Muscovites since the peat bog fires started in late July.

Equally disturbing is the estimated increase in the death rate during the smog-filled days. There was one city health official who, bucking the trend among bureaucrats, did not sugarcoat the effects of the smog. Andrei Seltsovsky, head of Moscow's health department said: "The average death rate in the city during normal times is between 360 and 380 people per day. Now we have about 700."

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