

How Air Quality Can Influence Your Survival

Of all the things that we talk about in survival and all the priorities we talk about, we rarely, if ever, talk about our need for oxygen. According to the rule of 3s, we will die in 30 minutes, if we are unable to maintain our body heat. But what about the most important survival need... the air that we breathe?

Oxygen deprivation can cause severe and lasting effects on our bodies, including death. Within the first 3 minutes, we'll likely lose consciousness and brain cells will start to die. That's lasting brain damage, along with additional damage to our nervous system. Permanent brain damage begins with as little as 4 minutes of oxygen deprivation, with death likely to occur after 4 to 6 minutes. Even the hardest athletes amongst us, who have increased their lung size and trained their bodies to get the most out of the oxygen they breathe in, won't last more than 10 minutes without air.

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I remember learning something about air quality, when I was being taught about pollution back in grade school. The environmental crowd has gotten a lot pushier about their agenda now, then they were back then, but even 50 years ago they were preaching how the world was going to end. While all forms of pollution figured into their disastrous predictions, air pollution seemed to be the biggest one. I clearly remember a movie that posed the question whether all life on the earth would be destroyed by fire or ice, brought about by air

pollution. The funny thing is, that message hasn't changed a bit in over 50 years.

There's no way that I can be called a radical environmentalist. Even so, I do care about our environment and think that it's all of our responsibility to take care of the world we live in. No, I'm not going to rush out and buy an electric car; and I really wouldn't want one if someone gave me one. On the other hand, I can't see destroying our planet, when that could ultimately lead to problems with clean water and food to eat.

Here's the thing though... While we talk about a lot of different disasters, we rarely talk about how those disasters will affect the environment around us and our ability to get the resources we need from that environment. That's changed since my youth, when the big fear was thermonuclear war. If there's anything that will mess up the environment, that's it. Even the air we breathe will be severely affected, loaded with fallout that we certainly won't want to breathe in.

Another threat that gets talked about from time to time, which will have a major impact on our air, is the Yellowstone Caldera erupting. Projections show soot from that eruption falling as far as 1,000 miles away, with the soot falling so deep at closer ranges, that the land will not support life. I imagine that close to the eruption, say within the first 500 miles, the air will literally be deadly to breathe.

That's a pretty serious situation; but it really doesn't take anything that serious to create air that is unsafe to breathe. Industrial accidents, gas lines broken by construction crews, forest fires, overturned tanker trucks and a host of other situations can create conditions where it is unsafe to breathe the air.

Shelter in Place

One of the things we should all do is keep track of what our local government is saying about emergencies, especially any announcements or declarations by our city or county EOC (emergency operations center). Part of their job is to monitor environmental conditions and let us all know when the air is not safe to breathe. Unfortunately, they don't always communicate that information all that well.

If your city or county has a "Reverse Alert" system, be sure to sign up for it. This cooperative system is used by government, industry and emergency services to let people know about hazardous situations, usually via text message or voicemail. Those can range from petroleum refineries "flaring," which really isn't dangerous at all, to gas leaks and chemical spills. Even dangerous weather, such as hurricanes, tornadoes and extreme heat are broadcast through the Reverse Alert system, letting residents know when potentially dangerous conditions are occurring.

When the air quality is dangerous, even just a little bit dangerous, the EOC will issue a "shelter in place" order/warning. This literally means what it sounds like; that everyone should shelter in their homes, workplaces or any other building they find themselves in. Measures should be taken to keep the outside air out, such as closing windows and doors, and placing wet towels at the bottom of doors to prevent air from seeping in underneath the door.

The most common reason for a shelter in place order is due to a natural gas leak, especially those caused by accidental breaching of a natural gas line during construction excavation. Adequate records of gas, water and other underground lines don't always exist, meaning that it is possible for workers to accidentally break a natural gas line with heavy equipment, because they don't even know it is

there.

But natural gas leaks are not the only reason a shelter in place order might be issued. The same danger can exist from a tanker truck or tanker train car rupturing in an accident, leaking chemicals that evaporate into the air. There are a wide range of chemicals that are in use today, many of which can produce poisonous gas. It might not kill you; but it might make you think it will.

Sheltering in place is intended to protect you from those fumes. If you are sealed inside your home, you have enough oxygen in the air to survive for several days. The average adult can survive 3.9 days on the air in a 10 ft. x 15 ft. x 8 ft tall room. Your home has much more total volume than that. While sheltering in place, you can survive by using the food and water you have stored in your emergency stockpile. Whatever chemical fumes will dissipate and an “all clear” will be issued long before you need to leave your home.

What About Gas Masks?

The standard answer that many preppers bring up, when such situations are discussed, is to say that they have gas masks. Good for them. But I’m not actually convinced that their gas masks are going to provide them with the protection that they think they will.

The problem is that the filters on gas masks are extremely specific, only providing protection for certain types of chemicals. While there are a large number of different types of filters available, offering protection from a lot of dangerous chemicals, if the wrong filter is in the mask for the chemicals you need protection from, that mask isn’t going to do you a whole lot of good.

This isn’t to say that you shouldn’t have gas masks, just that you should understand their limitations. If you live in an

area where chemical spills could occur (which is just about anywhere), then find out what sorts of chemicals are manufactured, used or transported through your area and buy yourself the appropriate filters for your gas masks.

But I Don't Have Gas Masks

Granted, not all of us have gas masks; and I'm really not trying to say that you should prioritize that as one of your prepping purchases. A shelter in place will take care of most chemical and natural gas leaks, eliminating the need for those gas masks anyway. If a TEOTWAWKI even poisons our air and its not going to clear up quickly, all the gas mask is going to do is extend your life slightly, until the filters are no longer good.

However, there are a number of things which can happen, that will put particulates in the air; enough so, that we should be prepared for it. Where I live, we get particulates from Sahara dust that actually blows across the Atlantic Ocean. We also receive soot in the air from agricultural burning in Mexico and even as far away as Central America. Denver, the Mile-High City, has regular problems with particulates in the air, that come from wildfires in Canada. Particulates are all over the place and can get extremely dangerous to one's health, especially when we're close to those fires.

But it doesn't take a gas mask to deal with particulate matter, all it takes is a dust mask. There are a variety of these around, ranging in price and quality. The N-95 masks we all got accustomed to using during the COVID-19 pandemic are actually dust masks, designed to protect wearers from dust from industrial operations or sawdust created during woodworking. As such, they work just fine for particulate matter in the air.



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A slightly better solution is the type of respirator that looks a lot like a gas mask, which is worn by painters and people working in industrial operations which create a lot of dust. Such masks are available for as little as \$20, with replacement filters available for \$10 and up, depending on the brand.

Don't Forget the Basics

Of course, sheltering in place will go a long way towards protecting our lungs from anything that might be in the air. But that's not the only simple defense we have available to us. Remember back in elementary school, when they taught us all what to do in case of a fire? They always said to get down close to the floor, because the air would be clearer there. Well, guess what? That hasn't changed any. If any of us find ourselves in a situation where there is anything dangerous in the air, but especially smoke in the air, getting down close to the floor is a great defense.

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