



## Bar drops lower for ozone alert days

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Northwest Indiana may experience more warnings of days with unhealthy ozone levels this year.

That could mean more days when young children, the elderly and people with respiratory problems should limit their time outside and when gas tanks should be filled in the evening.

When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency changed the ozone standard on March 12, the agency also changed the Air Quality Index. That's the scale of red, yellow, orange and green that signifies air quality and is used to determine Air Pollution Action Days, when people are asked to drive less and protect their health by staying inside.

Before, air quality was considered unhealthy for sensitive groups and labeled orange when ozone hit 85 parts of ozone or smog per billion units of air. Now a day will be called orange when the ozone level hits 75 parts.

**"This means you are going to see more unhealthy days called in Northwest Indiana, and likely more Air Pollution Action Days when such bad air days are predicted," said Brian Urbaszewski, director of the Environmental Health Program with the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago.**

**The greater Chicago area in Illinois had eight days in the orange range last summer. If this year's scale had been applied, 18 days would have been labeled orange, Urbaszewski said.**

**"I assume something similar in Northwest Indiana," he said.**

Indiana Department of Environmental Management spokesman Rob Elstro said the updated scale goes into effect May 27, but found it hard to say whether Northwest Indiana will have more days with unhealthy ozone levels.

"It's difficult to predict whether the number of action days we forecast this summer will increase or decrease, even before the ozone standard was changed. Ozone levels will depend on many factors (mobile and non-mobile emissions, weather, etc), which can vary," Elstro said in an e-mail.

Scientists and health organizations have argued a tougher standard of 60 to 70 parts per billion is needed to protect sensitive groups.

Ozone forms when oxides of nitrogen and volatile organic compounds react in heat and sunlight. It comes from vehicle exhaust, industrial emissions, gasoline vapors and chemical solvents.

"Good" ozone occurs naturally in the stratosphere 10 to 30 miles above the Earth's surface and forms a layer that protects us from the sun's harmful rays. "Bad" ozone occurs at the ground level and can aggravate asthma, irritate lungs and cause wheezing, coughing and breathing problems. Long-term exposure can cause permanent lung damage. Ozone also makes plants more susceptible to disease.

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