

## **Ozone standards enough to make you sick, even indoors**

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May 4, 2008

Stop and smell the flowers this spring because at the rate we're driving, lilacs and roses may one day have no fragrance at all.

Smog kills, the National Academy of Sciences confirmed last week in a report that linked ozone to premature death. Ozone, which is created when sunlight mixes with tailpipe emissions, damages the lungs when it's inhaled, much as sunburn singes the skin.

But air pollution isn't just hurting our health. It's diminishing the aroma of flowers, which, in turn, makes it hard for pollinators to find the plants.

This puts both species at risk and may be one explanation for the mysterious disappearance of honeybee populations, according to University of Virginia researchers.

Humans, unlike flowers and bees, can retreat indoors to get away from it all—which is precisely what we're often told to do on high-ozone days. But even this strategy can backfire.

We spend about 90 percent of our time indoors, breathing air that can be more seriously polluted than the outdoor air, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. New EPA data, meanwhile, show that smog can make people sick, even indoors.

Adding to the haze are these strange "ozone generators" that are sold as indoor air cleaners but can actually produce their own pollution, according to the EPA. The "air purifiers" work by releasing high amounts of ozone into a space.

But for these machines to actually work, they'd have to be spewing out ozone at levels that exceed public health standards, says the EPA, which, for some reason, hasn't restricted their sale.

"Whether in its pure form, or mixed with other chemicals, ozone can be harmful to health," the EPA concluded in an indoor air quality report on ozone generators. (Just remember, ozone is "good up high—bad nearby." While the ozone in the stratosphere is protective, ozone in the lower atmosphere—the air we breathe—can damage the respiratory system.)

To address the growing public health problem, the EPA in March slightly strengthened ozone pollution standards to 75 parts per billion (from 80 parts per billion). But then its own scientific advisers—who had recommended more stringent levels—slammed the new guidelines, calling them too lax.

The upshot of the new standard is that we will experience more "unhealthy air quality" days this summer.

States, however, don't have to accept the weak federal guidelines. Thirteen have already adopted tougher tailpipe emission standards; in Illinois, meanwhile, legislators are working to pass the Clean Cars Act (HB 3424).

The bill could cut ozone smog-forming air pollution by 10 to 15 percent and save drivers \$1 billion per year in gas, according to Brian Urbaszewski, director of the environmental health program of the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago.

Supporters aren't sure if they have the 60 votes to pass it; they're hosting a round-table discussion this week. In the meantime, we could heed a message from some children in Lombard, home to world-renowned Lilacia Park, which features 200 varieties of lilacs and 50 types of tulips.

On Earth Day last week, the students urged drivers waiting at schools and the Metra station to turn off their cars by rewarding them with keychains that said "Idling Gets You Nowhere."

Idling creates tiny dirt particles that can become lodged deep within the lungs. Most people don't realize that idling for more than 30 seconds burns more gas than it takes to restart the engine.

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