



SMOG ALERT

Spring sunshine brings first air quality health warning

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As warm weather and sunshine beckoned to winter-weary Torontonians yesterday, health authorities rained on their parade with stern warnings to avoid strenuous activity or otherwise stay indoors.

Toronto Public Health issued its first high health risk reading of air quality for 2008, rating the city's air a seven on the newly implemented 10-point Air Quality Health Index.

According to Environment Canada's website, a seven presents a "high health risk," and healthy individuals should "consider reducing or rescheduling strenuous activities outdoors," while people with heart or breathing problems, children and the elderly should "reduce or reschedule strenuous activities outdoors."

The Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) is an experimental measure finishing its first trial year as an alternative gauge of air quality to the province's current smog alert system.

Ontario's Environment Ministry also issued a smog advisory yesterday for Toronto and surrounding parts of the province.

Monica Campbell, manager of Toronto Public Health's environmental protection office, said in an interview yesterday that the new AQHI index was "a unique tool that integrates the health risk," designed to help city-dwellers relate air quality indices to their own symptoms, and what level of activity was appropriate.

"What a seven means is that if you are part of this at risk population, the guidance is that one should reduce strenuous activities outdoors so that you reduce your total intake of pollutants and thereby reduce the risk associated with breathing dirty air," she said.

According to critics, however, the AQHI and other air quality indices are a nuisance that generates unnecessary concern without promoting good health.

"It just creates a kind of vague anxiety for people," said Ross McKittrick, an associate professor of economics at the University of Guelph and author of several books and research papers concerning air pollution and public policy.

Despite the high health risk warning, as the sun continued to warm the city joggers with pale legs and children with Frisbees flocked to the parks.