



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Wildfires: A Growing Hazard in the U.S.

Wildfire-Related Deaths - Texas, March 12-20, 2006

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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds.

In March 2006, residents in the Texas panhandle suffered through over a week of devastating fires that claimed 12 lives and damaged over \$16 million in property. Researchers from CDC investigated these fires. Dr. Dahna Batts was a member of that team and she's here to discuss their findings and offer suggestions to help prevent similar tragedies. Welcome to the show, Dr. Batts.

[Dr. Batts] Thank you so much.

[Matthew Reynolds] The CDC does a lot to prevent disease and promote health, as many people know, but investigating fires? Why is CDC involved?

[Dr. Batts] CDC is involved because the environmental health issues that a wildfire presents are a preventable cause of death. So, as an environmental health agency, in addition to other areas of health that we investigate, wildfires could be a big problem and it is a preventable cause of disease and injury.

[Matthew Reynolds] Well, let's talk about those fires. Can you describe the ones that swept through the panhandle? What happened?

[Dr. Batts] There was devastated fires in 2006 in Texas where the wildfires did spread throughout a region of Texas and cause a number of deaths. This was one of the largest wildfires and tragically resulted in the largest number of human deaths in the civilian population in Texas history. So this particular incident was quite devastating. Many of the injuries and illnesses that occurred were due to smoke and haze, as well as some behaviors that, if the public wasn't involved in, could have prevented death.

[Matthew Reynolds] Most people who are hearing about this story tend to think of it as news, a tragedy certainly, and then move on without giving it another thought. You're saying that's a mistake?

[Dr. Batts] Yes, that would be a mistake. All wildfire-related deaths and injuries are potentially preventable. There are proven methods that home owners and responders can take to protect themselves, as well as their home and their property, but all of these need to be accomplished prior to the wildfire starting.

[Matthew Reynolds] Well let's talk about some of those strategies. What should people do to protect themselves and their families?

[Dr. Batts] People should really have a disaster preparedness plan and an exit strategy that would take effect under any type of emergency, especially a wildfire. They should really adhere to any warnings or evacuation orders that are administered. Creating a disaster plan, as well as a disaster supply kit, really does not take a lot of time or effort, but it is something that could be critical in saving your life in the event of an emergency.

[Matthew Reynolds] What about protecting homes? Are there things that people can do to protect their homes, in addition to their families?

[Dr. Batts] To protect your home from a wildfire, it's very important for you to keep any combustible materials away from structures. You want to avoid the build up of any flammable material by cleaning roof surface and gutters regularly. Those are two critical steps that a person can do to protect their home from the effect of a wildfire.

[Matthew Reynolds] What should I do if I'm driving down the road and the roadway is suddenly filled with smoke?

[Dr. Batts] You should avoid traveling through a smoke filled roadway at all costs. This is one of the mechanisms that many of the individuals in this particular event died. They were in motor vehicles and involved in collisions or trauma episodes due to driving on a road where visibility was poor because it was filled with smoke.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Batts, this information has been very helpful. If people want more information about evacuation plans and prevention suggestions for wildfires and other disasters, where should they go?

[Dr. Batts] They can go to their local health department or local emergency management agency website, as well as the CDC emergency website which is www.emergency.cdc.gov for further guidance, as well as instructions on how to prepare for a number of different types of disasters.

[Matthew Reynolds] Thank you, Dr. Batts, for taking the time to share this information with our listeners.

[Dr. Batts] Your welcome; thank you very much for having me.

[Matthew Reynolds] That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for A cup of Health with CDC.

[Announcer] To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.