

Breathing easier in the big city ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have noticed the air quality is very bad here in New York City. I was thinking of buying a humidifier so that I could breathe cleaner air at night. Would hot steam or cold steam be better? Do you think this would make a difference for my lungs?

Thank you,
Needs Clean Air

Answer

Dear Needs Clean Air,

It's true that New York City is no Salinas, California, which is ranked as the cleanest metropolitan area in the U.S. in 2015 by the American Lung Association. In fact, NYC is ranked number 11 on the list of most polluted metropolitan areas. Even so, a humidifier won't make a difference for your struggling lungs. Humidifiers do not clean the air; they add warm or cool moisture. This increase in humidity can help prevent dry skin, noses, and throats, especially when exposed to heated air during the cold months. Humidifiers can also make it more comfortable for those with colds or sore throats to breathe ? but they do not cure these illnesses, nor do they purify air. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ^[2] has information about the use and care of home humidifiers on their web site, including comparisons between warm and cool mist units.

What you're probably looking for are air filters, especially HEPA filters that can remove microscopic particles. These devices can make the air cleaner, and are sometimes recommended for people with asthma and/or severe allergies. However, they tend to be expensive (good ones can cost hundreds of dollars), and need to be cleaned frequently if they're going to continue to work at maximum efficiency. While owning an air filter won't hurt, no evidence exists that they offer significant health benefits for people without breathing problems.

The American Lung Association ^[3] offers the following recommendations to help people who live in high pollution areas (such as New York City) breathe easier:

- Plan outdoor exercise or strenuous work in the mornings or night, when pollution levels are lower.
- If possible, avoid rush hour traffic and streets that are especially congested; instead,

choose roads and sidewalks off the beaten path.

- Check your local weather for smog alerts (most likely to occur from May to September). On smog alert days, children, the elderly, and folks with heart and lung problems need to be especially careful to avoid strenuous outdoor activity.
- Support laws and regulations to control air pollution.

All that said, if you would like to buy a humidifier or an air filter to see if they let you breathe easier, go for it. You may also find that potted plants lend your bedroom the illusion of "greener pastures," so to speak. The city can feel grungy sometimes; experiment with your surroundings so that you're comfortable, and sleep well!

Alice!

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[3] <http://www.lungusa.org/>

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