

THE AIR WE BREATHE

EVERY SUMMER, the Washington region suffers through Code Orange and Code Red days. These aren't terrorism alerts. They're a measure of pollution in the air we breathe.

Last summer, there were 19 Code Orange days, one Code Red day and one Code Purple day, which is when the air is so bad anyone who steps outside risks "serious health effects." Already this summer, there have been five Code Orange days, two just this past week.

The main concerns in the Washington area are levels of fine particles and ozone. In summer, ozone is the main concern.

Several factors generally beyond our control contribute to ozone levels

— power plants in the Ohio River Valley, wind speed, wind direction and heat among them.

But we commuters also play a huge part in the quality of air we breathe. Car emissions account for a little more than a third of ozone.

Generally, three factors determine how much pollution your car emits: vehicle type/weight, the vehicle's age and the speed you're driving. Emissions rates at 5 mph are roughly double the rates at 30 mph. A new, light car that is traveling around 35 mph is the cleanest. An older, heavier truck stuck in gridlock is the dirtiest. Hybrid good, Hummer bad.

Here's a look at how much pollution your car emits:

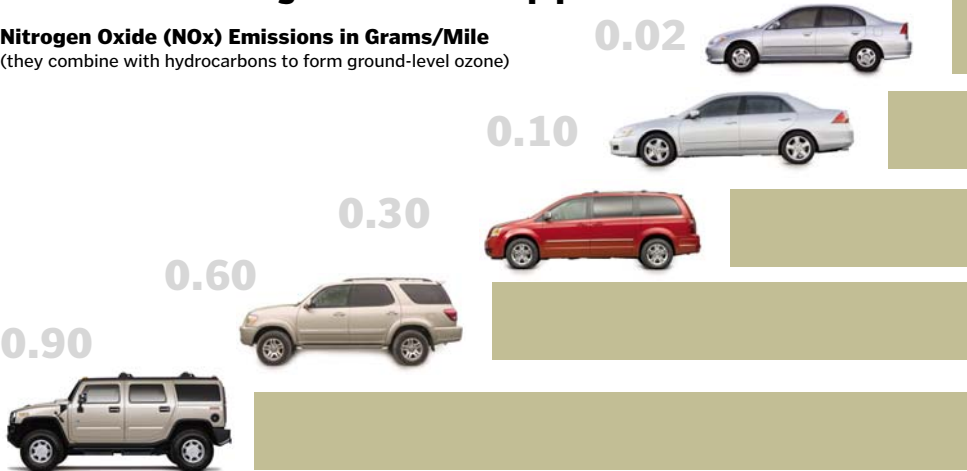


BY MICHAEL WILLIAMSON — THE WASHINGTON POST

The first Code Orange day this year, May 31, produced a slightly fuzzy haze over the Beltway.

What’s That Coming Out of Your Tailpipe?



Nitrogen Oxide (NOx) Emissions in Grams/Mile
(they combine with hydrocarbons to form ground-level ozone)




No matter what kind of car you drive, there are several things you can do to cut down on poor air quality:

- Fill up your gas tank during evening hours.
- Avoid spilling gas and “topping off” the tank.
- Replace gas cap tightly.
- Have your car tuned regularly by replacing the oil and air filters, and keep tires properly inflated and aligned.
- Carpool or use public transportation when possible.
- Combine your errands into one trip.
- Avoid revving or idling your engine.
- Avoid long drive-through lines; instead, park your car and go in.

How Many Carpoolers Does It Take to . . .





In Virginia, solo hybrid drivers are allowed to use HOV lanes, a perk that annoys carpoolers who think hybrids clog the lanes and defeat one of the primary purposes of carpooling: getting more people in fewer cars to cut down on pollution. Three people in one car is better than three people in three hybrids, they reason. They might be right as far as congestion goes, but not on air quality:

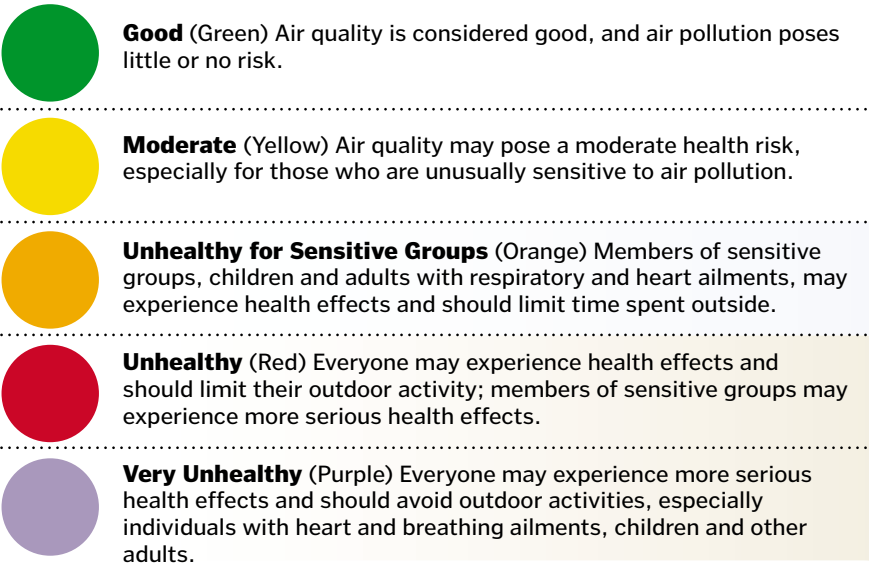
Five people would have to squeeze into a Camry or an Accord to equal the pollution emitted by five people in five Priuses or Civic Hybrids.

Fifteen people would have to cram into a standard SUV to offset 15 hybrids.

Thirty would have to get into a Toyota Sequoia or Land Rover.

And 45 people would have to carpool in a Hummer to equal the emissions of 45 drivers in 45 hybrids. Hummers are big, but not that big.

The Air Quality Index



Several public transit systems provide free rides

On Code Orange, Red and Purple days, rides are free on:

- Alexandria DASH
- Arlington Transit
- Fairfax City CUE
- Fairfax Connector
- Loudoun County Transit Commuter Bus Service
- Loudoun County Transit Fixed Route Service
- Metrobuses in Northern Virginia
- PRTC OmniLink
- Falls Church GEORGE Buses



In addition, on Code Red and Purple days, rides are also free on:

- Metrobuses in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties
- Montgomery County Ride On
- Prince George’s County THE BUS