



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

## LIVING IN DHAKA with chronic respiratory issues

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What you think is fog or just nice winter air is actually smog, the result of intense air pollution. Dhaka, the bustling capital of Bangladesh, now ranks among the most polluted cities on Earth – an alarming reality for its more than 20 million residents. Every breath taken in this city comes with a cost. On the Air Quality Index (AQI), Dhaka's numbers frequently soar to dangerous levels, posing severe risks to everyone's health, particularly those already struggling with respiratory conditions.

In 2024, Dhaka's AQI often exceeded 400 during the dry season – levels classified as "hazardous" even for people in perfect health. To put this

into perspective, it's like spending the entire day in a room filled with cigarette smoke, with no windows or ventilation. While other parts of Bangladesh suffer from pollution to various degrees, Dhaka seems to be in the worst situation.

The sources of this pollution are as diverse as they are destructive. Vehicles burning low-quality fuel choke the streets with black exhaust. Factories on the city's outskirts emit harmful gases, while construction sites kick up clouds of dust that never seem to settle. Construction-heavy districts like Gulshan and Uttara frequently report AQI numbers above 420, turning the air gritty enough to leave a noticeable film of dust on skin and clothes after just a short time outside.

For us, Dhaka's polluted air isn't just a statistic – it's a daily, life-altering challenge. Dr Ziaul Huq, 58, a senior consultant of respiratory medicine at Evercare Hospital, has witnessed the devastating consequences firsthand. "The air quality in Bangladesh often triggers what we call acute severe asthma," he explains. "These attacks respond slowly – or not at all – to standard treatments. They can become life-threatening, which is tragic when you realise that better air quality could have prevented many of these crises."

One of Dr Huq's patients, a woman in her early 40s, regularly suffers from severe asthma attacks. "It's difficult for her to find relief, even with multiple medications," he recounts. "She's been

hospitalised several times, and each time, it's a struggle to stabilise her." Sadly, her story is far from unique. Across Dhaka, countless residents find themselves in similar predicaments, relying on inhalers and hospital visits for temporary relief from the city's toxic air.

Inhalers, while essential for managing asthma and other respiratory conditions, are not without their downsides. Many people are unaware that frequent or improper use of inhalers can lead to side effects. Common side effects of reliever inhalers (short-acting bronchodilators) include shakiness, headaches, and an increased heart rate. Overuse can reduce their effectiveness, making it harder to manage sudden asthma attacks. On the other hand, preventer inhalers (steroid-based) can cause oral thrush, a fungal infection in the mouth, and may lead to hoarseness or a sore throat if not used correctly. In fact, the use of inhalers can lead to a slow decay of teeth over time. Rinsing the mouth after each use and following the prescribed dosage can help mitigate these issues.

Sarah Hossain, a 34-year-old mother, shares her 8-year-old daughter's heartbreaking story. "She's grown up with asthma that barely flares up when we're abroad," Sarah explains. "But in Dhaka, she can hardly breathe."

Her daughter has been hospitalised six times due to severe asthma attacks. "Masks and inhalers do little to no help. Clean air in Dhaka has become a luxury we can't afford. I don't allow her to play any sports or go to parks. It might seem excessive, but even staying outside for a few hours induces a horrible asthma attack that very night."

For families like Sarah's, leaving the city might seem like the only escape – but for most, this is simply not an option.

While asthma often has genetic roots, Dhaka's harsh environmental conditions have led to an increase in people developing respiratory issues later in life.

Rafiq Ul Khan, a 23-year-old student of BRAC University, speaks of his constant struggle with dust allergies. "Living in Dhaka with a dust allergy is terrible," he says. "I'm forced to choose between constant medication or suffering around the clock. Masks and keeping my house spotless only help so much; dust is everywhere. It hurts to breathe."

These stories reveal a sobering truth: Dhaka's air isn't just damaging, it's deadly. According to a report from the Department of Environment and the World Bank, air pollution in Dhaka is responsible for thousands of premature deaths each year. Long-term exposure doesn't just lead to respiratory diseases like asthma or bronchitis, but also increases the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and even cancer. Children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable, but no one is truly safe.

Growing up in Dhaka with asthma or any respiratory condition is like living with an invisible weight pressing down

on your chest. For children, the simplest joys – running around in the park, playing cricket on the street, or walking to school – become exhausting tasks. Parents must constantly monitor their children's activities, checking AQI levels like they would the weather and always staying alert for signs of wheezing or shortness of breath.

While inhalers are a critical tool in managing asthma, there are additional strategies that can help reduce the frequency and severity of attacks. Improving indoor air quality is one of the most effective measures. Using air purifiers with HEPA filters, sealing windows to prevent outdoor pollutants from entering, and regularly cleaning surfaces to reduce dust accumulation can significantly lessen exposure to allergens. Wearing high-quality masks, such as N95 respirators, when outdoors can also provide a protective barrier against harmful particles.

But even indoors, there's no true escape. Dust seeps in through the smallest cracks, and the ever-present haze outside is a reminder of the air they're forced to breathe. Medical expenses pile up, with families spending significant portions of their income on treatments, doctor visits, and medications just to manage the symptoms. As a victim of dust allergy and asthma myself, the frustration of never being healthy, always dependent on medication and masks, is something that only gets harder with time.

The psychological burden extends to parents as well. There's a constant sense of guilt and helplessness, knowing that their children are suffering from something largely beyond their control. Many parents wrestle with difficult decisions – should they uproot their lives and move to another city or country, if that's even an option? Should they change jobs or pull their children out of school during particularly bad pollution spells? The weight of these choices hangs over families, turning what should be life decisions into complex, emotionally charged dilemmas.

The consequences of growing up in a city like Dhaka extend beyond health. They shape identities, limit opportunities, and instill a sense of vulnerability that can last a lifetime. For some, the city is home despite its challenging place of culture, family, and memories. But for others, it's a constant reminder of what they are missing: the simple, unburdened act of breathing freely.

### References:

1. World Bank Group (March 28, 2023). *Bangladesh Needs Urgent Actions to Curb Air Pollution*.
2. World Bank Group (December 4, 2022). *High Air Pollution Level is Creating Physical and Mental Health Hazards in Bangladesh*. World Bank.

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### Understanding the six categories of the AIR QUALITY INDEX (AQI)

#### » GREEN (0-50):

The air is safe to breathe.

#### » YELLOW (51-100):

The air quality is considered moderate, except for the most sensitive groups.

#### » ORANGE (101-150):

Sensitive groups should reduce heavy exertion outside or take more breaks, and people with asthma and heart disease should watch for symptoms. The rest of the population may be fine.

#### » RED (151-200):

The air is unhealthy for everyone. Sensitive groups should avoid being active outdoors, while everyone else should reduce their time outdoors.

#### » PURPLE (201-300):

The air is very unhealthy for everyone. Everyone should consider moving their activities inside.

#### » MAROON (301 and above):

This is the highest level – hazardous – and anyone can be at risk. Everyone should avoid physical activity outdoors, and if you're sensitive, you should remain indoors.



## Why you should be concerned about your trail of digital footprint

ADRIN SARWAR

Have you ever felt like somebody is keeping an eye on you on the internet? Have you thought about how the internet seems to know precisely what it is that you're thinking about even though you haven't mentioned it to anyone? These might seem like coincidences, but they are not. In fact, if you followed these questions, it would probably lead to the same answer: digital footprint. But what is it?

Every time you go online, you leave a digital footprint. Small traces of whatever you do – whether you browse, post, or just click – are left behind. Your digital footprint includes all your activities and information, which are obtained through your browsing history, app usage, and location data amongst other sources.

Websites themselves use cookies to track your online activity. Cookies are small pieces of data stored on your device that help websites remember things like your browsing history, login details, or preferences. Most of the time, these sites ask for your permission before using the cookies. While cookies do improve your experience of using the internet, they enable websites to monitor your activities and tailor advertisements according to your interests.

Another way of tracking your digital footprint is by saving personal information such as login and payment details across different platforms. For example, you may not have to sign in every time you visit Facebook or insert payment details every time you shop online.

These things might make your internet journey smooth. However, nothing on the internet is truly free. Companies track down their

user's digital footprint for revenue-generating purposes. They market their target products according to the user's digital footprint, making your data a marketable asset to different companies.

What makes this entire process so gravely concerning is the fact that your digital footprint is tied to your privacy, security, and even reputation. The things you do online can be picked up by advertisers, future employers, and even cybercriminals. This can sometimes spill over into your real life, shaping opportunities or causing problems.

While having zero digital footprint is impossible, you can take simple steps to reduce the trail you leave behind and stay in control of your online identity. To do so, you must maintain basic internet hygiene by using separate emails for home, school, and work. This helps you to protect your privacy and keep things

organised. It is also important that you're cautious of what you share on social media or any other platform. Your posts and data might be more public and permanent than you think.

Furthermore, most browsers, apps, and devices are designed to store and use your data to enhance user experience. So, take the time to check your settings, adjust them to protect your privacy, and think twice before granting new permissions. If you are interested in enhancing your online experience without compromising privacy, you can use dedicated tools. There are plenty of options that can help safeguard your digital footprint and give you more control over what information service providers can have access to.

Another way to protect your digital footprint is by deleting cookies and cache. Regularly cleaning up helps reduce the amount of data third parties can collect about you. To

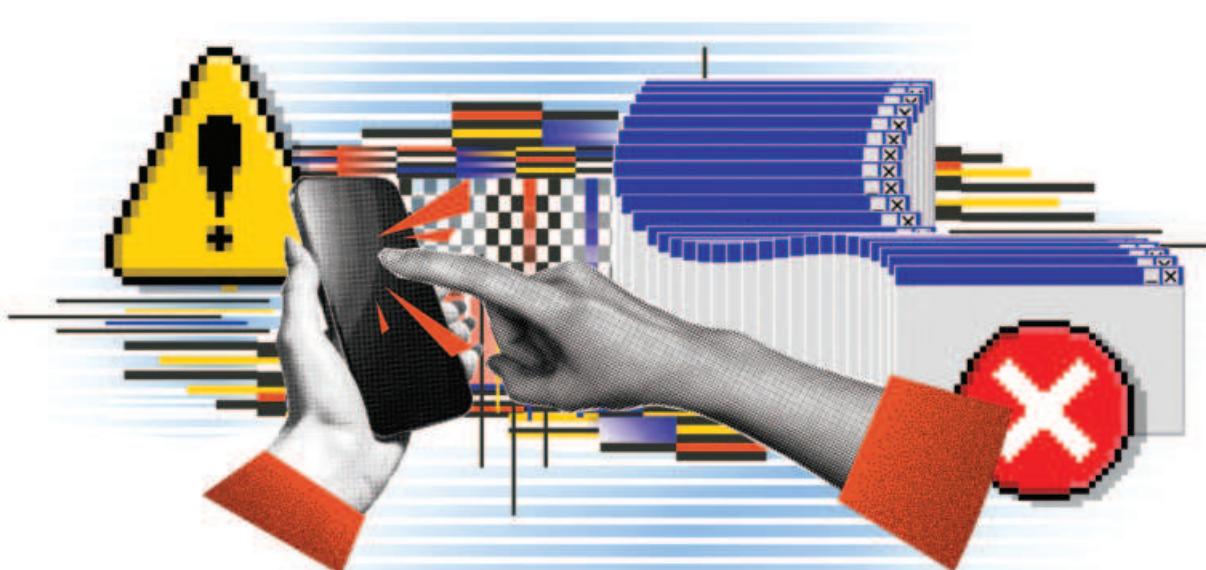


ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

decrease the risk of data breaches, get rid of accounts you no longer use. Keeping old accounts adds to your digital footprint and can give you an easy way to access your information since you might not be keeping an eye on them for unusual activity.

Taking care of your digital footprint is like maintaining a clean online presence. If you're on the internet in any capacity, you will leave some trail behind. Nonetheless, you can always reduce it and take control of things companies know about you. What tools you use and how you access the internet depends mostly on you. With a little effort, you can enjoy the internet while keeping your personal space safe.

### References:

1. Internet Society (October 22, 2024). *Take a Step Towards Privacy: Understanding Digital Footprints*.