

Protecting HEALTH from climate change

World Health Day 2008

DID YOU KNOW? ... BY TAKING ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE YOU ARE PROTECTING HUMAN HEALTH

Why should you care? What can you do?

Messages to different groups and sectors



**Message: Climate change endangers human health and survival.
Protect health from climate change: act now!**

Why should you care?

- Wherever you live, climate change threatens your health.** Whether you live in a big metropolis, a coastal town, a village or on a small island, climate change threatens your health and well-being. Global warming induced by climate change dramatically disrupts some of life's basic essential requirements for health: water, air and food.
- Health damage from climate change is already happening.** Climate-related injuries and illnesses account for over 150 000 deaths and 5.5 million¹ healthy life years lost a year. Climate-related disasters result in over 60 000 deaths each year², mainly in developing countries; even in Europe the extreme hot summer of 2003, related to climate change, caused more than 70 000 excess deaths.³
- It is projected to get much worse!** If current trends of global warming are not stopped, rising temperatures and sea levels and extreme weather (heatwaves, storms, floods, droughts, cyclones, etc.) could lead to severe food, water and fuel shortages, loss of homes and livelihoods, mass migrations, death and suffering. Climate-sensitive killers like malaria, undernutrition and diarrhoea — already causing many millions of deaths a year — are likely to hit harder.
- The risks are not fairly distributed.** Most greenhouse gases that cause climate change originate from richer industrialized countries but, unfairly, the health risks are mainly projected to fall on countries (and social groups within all countries) that have contributed least to the problem and where malnutrition is already widespread, education is poor, and health system infrastructures are weak. Globally, people at greatest risk include those who are very young or very old, medically infirm or socially isolated.
- It doesn't have to be this way: action now can protect health from climate change.** There are many actions all of us can take right now to protect ourselves, our families and the most vulnerable groups from health threats related to current climate change, and there is much we can all do to prevent future health disasters (see below).
- In fact, reducing global warming can be good for health, the environment and the economy!** Reducing our carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions (which are causing global warming) through better transport, food and energy use choices can result in more physical activity, less obesity, fewer transport-related injuries, cleaner air, fewer asthmatic and other respiratory diseases, better diets and less diabetes, heart disease and cancer. In addition, the money saved from not having to cover the health-care costs of conditions related to climate change (e.g. respiratory difficulties caused by air pollution) often matches or exceeds the costs of tackling the hazardous emissions!

What can you do to help?

- Learn, share and act.** Learn more about the health effects of climate change and practical ways to protect health now and into the future (see <http://www.who.int/phe>). Share this information with family, friends and colleagues. Take action both to adapt to current health threats (see 8 and 9 below) and prevent (mitigate) future changes (10, 11, and 12).



8. **Protect yourself and your family.** Actions should be focused on current local health threats related to climate change. These will be different depending upon where you live. In areas where malaria may become a greater risk, for example, you can learn to recognize symptoms of disease, form mosquito-watch committees with neighbours, find out about new medicines you may need, and teach your children to take precautions such as applying bug repellents. In areas where heatwaves and other extreme weather conditions are likely to worsen, you can take action to ensure that your homes have adequate ventilation and that necessary hydration and cooling measures will be available, especially for the most vulnerable people.
9. **Work for the necessary “system level” action.** All institutions, municipalities and countries can help protect health by putting health at the heart of their climate change planning, policies and actions. You can ensure this happens by joining your voice with others calling for strong protective policies and effective enforcement. For example, in areas threatened by heatwaves, local and national authorities can develop early warning alerts. In new malaria areas, health systems can ensure health providers are aware of and knowledgeable about potential threats, that surveillance and disaster response systems are adjusted and strengthened, and that the required supplies are obtained and stored.
10. **Carry out a personal “carbon audit”.** You can help prevent future damage by reducing the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂, one of the most important greenhouse gases) you produce through your transport, heating, cooling, lighting and other choices. You can use “carbon calculators” to work out just how much carbon you currently produce, your so-called **carbon footprint** (see <http://actonco2.direct.gov.uk>). High carbon footprints are bad for health and the environment.
11. **Reduce your carbon footprint.** Once you have worked out what your carbon footprint is, develop an action plan to reduce it where needed. If you are a high carbon emitter, you can identify ways to reduce your energy use (and improve your health!) through cycling, walking, using public transport, better waste management and choosing products with smaller carbon impact. If you are a low carbon emitter, you can learn how to make development choices that are “carbon friendly”. Annex 1 lists a few simple things everyone can do.
12. **Advocate for healthier and fairer climate change policies.** While individual action will make a difference, broad system-level changes will be required to make the kind of carbon reductions needed to protect health. Join with others and work to reduce the carbon footprints of your workplace, community, city, country and the whole world.

References

1. McMichael A et al. Climate change. In: Ezzati M et al., eds. Comparative quantification of health risks: global and regional burden of disease due to selected major risk factors. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2004.
2. Robine JM, et al. Death toll exceeded 70,000 in Europe during the summer of 2003. *C R Biol*, 2008, 331:171–178.
3. Hales S, Edwards S, Kovats R. Impacts on health of climate extremes. In: McMichael AJ et al., eds. Climate change and health: risks and responses. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2003.

Visit www.who.int/world-health-day

The messages provided are a global mix, some more applicable to developed and some to developing countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) strongly encourages adaptations to suit local conditions and reach a local audience.

