



Climate Change Is a Public Health Issue

There is a direct connection between climate change and the health of our nation today. Few Americans, however, are aware of the very real consequences for our communities, our families and our children. It is time for the public health community to take a seat at the table for this critical discussion.

The Issue and the Challenge

Over the past year, scientists from around the globe have stated in the strongest possible terms that the climate is changing, and human activity is to blame. Greenhouse gases — mainly from the fossil fuels we burn in our cars and trucks, the power plants that bring us electricity and the industries that manufacture our goods and produce our food — are causing temperatures on Earth to increase.

These changes are already dramatically affecting human health around the world. The World Health Organization reported that the climate change which occurred from 1961 to 1990 may already be causing over 150,000 deaths or the loss of over 5.5 million disability adjusted life years annually starting in 2000.

These numbers are staggering, but they should not be surprising: climate change influences our living environment on the most fundamental level, which means it affects the basic biological functions critical to life. It impacts the air we breathe and the food available for us to eat. It impacts the availability of our drinking water and the spread of diseases that can make us sick.

These impacts are different in different parts of the world — and equally troubling, they are disproportionately burdensome for the world's more vulnerable populations. Children, the elderly, the poor and those with chronic and other health conditions are considered the most vulnerable to the negative health impacts of climate change because they are most susceptible to extreme weather events like heat waves, drought, intense storms and floods. They are also least likely to have the resources to prepare or respond. This unequal burden seems especially unjust given that these populations are the least likely to contribute to climate change. Any strategies for managing climate change impacts must take their unique challenges and needs into account.

Why the Public Health Community Is Uniquely Qualified to Respond

There is growing recognition that we must act and we must act now. As public health professionals, we are in the unique position of playing an important role in both keeping people healthy and addressing the impacts of climate change. Thankfully, these twin goals are not incompatible. In fact, many of the choices individuals should make for the sake of their health — and the health of their communities — are the same choices that benefit the health of the planet. Making the climate change issue real means helping people understand how the way they live affects themselves and others, whether through transportation choices, the use of water and electricity or the types of goods purchased and consumed.

Encouraging behavior change is familiar territory for public health experts, and it is a key part of the solution. The shift away from fossil fuels and a movement toward general environmental awareness aligns with existing public health priorities:

- The transportation sector is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gases. Encouraging people to walk, bike, use public transportation or carpool is co-beneficial, as it helps reduce vehicle greenhouse gas emissions and helps improve an individual's health by increasing physical activity.
- Similarly, improving community design to reduce reliance on cars means less greenhouse gases and also less obesity, diabetes and even asthma exacerbation because of cleaner air.
- Eating less meat reduces the need to convert land from rainforest or grassland to grazing fields; requires less corn to be grown for feed (meaning less pesticides and other fossil fuel-based products needed in the growing process); and reduces the output of methane gases from manure.



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There are public health professionals around the country already implementing groundbreaking strategies to respond to and prevent the potentially devastating impacts of climate change. Others are in the trenches, tackling public health problems day in and day out without recognizing that many of them are directly related to climate change.

The public health system will be a frontline responder to potential emergency conditions caused by climate change. It will also play a key role in informing, educating and empowering the nation to make the changes needed to mitigate the problem.

Moving Forward

As representatives of the public health community, we acknowledge that it is our responsibility to make the connection between the way Americans lead their lives, their impact on the planet and the planet's impact on their health. By highlighting these links, we can help Americans make choices and lead lifestyles that are healthy for them, their families, their communities and the climate. Doing so will help communities prepare to manage and lessen the impacts of climate change.

We recognize that climate change requires serious actions and we have no time to waste. We support the development of a detailed blueprint around which the public health community can continue to build consensus about how to prevent further damage and respond to existing problems. We believe the following recommendations are the starting point and reflect the unique contribution of the public health community.

Recommendations

Education and outreach

- Educate yourself, your family and your community about the connection between climate change and health.
- Build partnerships with stakeholders to ensure inclusion of public health concerns on policies and programs related to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Reach out to colleagues in other programs and departments at the local, state and federal levels, such as emergency management agencies, departments of agriculture and water resources, and others to form a cross-agencies committee to collaborate on climate change-related risks.

Research

- Conduct vulnerability and needs assessment(s) and determine the potential impacts of climate change within your community. Evaluate how a future climate could affect the ability of programs to achieve their goals, and identify where and when modifications are likely to be needed, and what additional human, financial and technical resources will be required.
- Support and promote federal funding of research on the health impacts of climate change and how the impact varies by geography, climate and community, in particular among vulnerable populations.

Advocacy

- Educate decision-makers (policy-makers, opinion leaders) about the connections between climate change and health with a particular focus on its impact on vulnerable populations.
- Support and promote policies that strengthen public health leadership and work force capacity to ensure the infrastructure is in place to be ready.

Support Best Practices

- Identify and build upon existing public health programs that can also help to address the health impacts of climate change. Ensure that surveillance and data monitoring programs capture information needed to improve public health programs and effectively identify and address the health risks of climate change.
- Support and promote policies to develop and design communities that benefit both health and the environment.

Healthy Behavior

- Help the public health system go green and initiate programs to green your work environment.
- Adopt as many good practices as possible to reduce your contribution to climate change. For example, reduce, reuse and recycle, and give your car a break. If possible and you are not already taking advantage of available opportunities, use public transportation, carpool, walk, bike or telecommute.