

8 Ways Climate Change Affects Health

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sible, and avoid going outdoors. If you do need to go outside, consider wearing an effective face mask.

5. Floods and Storms Bring Injury and Mental Health Strain

Global warming increases the severity and frequencies of storms and floods, which cause thousands of deaths and economic losses, says William Rom, MD, MPH, global distinguished professor of environmental health at NYU School of Global Public Health in New York City.

Climate models show that heavy rainfall events are increasing, raising flood risk in many regions.

Flooding is associated with injuries and waterborne illness. It also takes a psychological toll that can be long-lasting: Research shows increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide for up to 18 months after major flood events.

Floods can also disrupt access to medications and time-sensitive treatments, increasing risk for people with chronic disease. Natural disasters and extreme weather have also been shown to worsen health-care disparities among more vulnerable people, such as elderly adults or marginalized communities that already have less access to care.

How to Cope

Create an action plan in case of natural disaster. If you rely on medical devices that require a power source or have limited mobility or are on a prescription medication, talk with your doctor and loved ones so that you're ready for whatever might happen.

6. Warmer Weather Is Expanding Infectious Disease

Research shows that rising temperatures and changes in rainfall can make regions more hospitable to disease carriers like mosquitos and ticks, which means malaria, dengue fever, and Lyme disease may spread into areas that have not previously been at risk, says Linda Rudolph, MD, MPH, di-

rector of the Center for Climate Change and Health at the Public Health Institute, an independent nonprofit.

"Warmer temperatures can also affect how quickly some pathogens grow and replicate — like, for example, some of the bacteria that cause food poisoning," says Dr. Rudolph.

Rudolph also points out that climate change can cause both animals and humans to migrate, putting people into contact with germs they may not have encountered before.

"As the planet gets hotter, some animals are moving toward the poles, coming into contact for the first time with different animals, and in some cases with people," she says. That has been the case, for instance, with the lone star tick, which is responsible for spreading a condition known as alpha gal syndrome.

"We also know that deforestation — which is also a significant cause of climate change — is causing a loss of natural habitats and making animals move to new areas, where they might share germs with people or other animals," she says.

How to Cope

The best way to avoid infectious disease spread by tick and mosquito bites is good protection. Pay attention to tick and mosquito activity in your area, and when activity is high, wear clothing that covers most of your skin and use EPA-approved repellent.

7. More Pollen May Worsen Allergies and Skin Diseases

"Warmer temperatures also mean that plants produce more pollen, and many people who suffer from allergies are finding that their allergies are worse and the allergy season is longer," Rudolph says.

Carbon pollution and warmer temperatures make plants produce more pollen over longer growing seasons. In fact, scientists have

suggested that average pollen counts in 2040 will be more than double what they were in 2000.

There's also evidence that increases in allergens, pollutants, and extreme weather events can make atopic dermatitis (eczema) worse.

How to Cope

If you have seasonal allergies, work with your doctor to create an individualized plan that addresses your triggers as they relate to local climate and seasonal changes. You may want to limit your pollen exposure by planning outdoor activities for times of day when pollen counts are at their lowest.

8. Air Pollution May Increase the Risk of Alzheimer's Disease

Fine particulate matter — the microscopic pollution released when fossil fuels are burned — may raise the risk of Alzheimer's disease, says Patel.

In a large national study of older Americans, higher long-term exposure to particulate matter was linked with an increased likelihood of developing this neurodegenerative illness.

The tiny particles appear to trigger inflammation and damage blood vessels, processes that also seem to play a role in neurodegeneration. The association was slightly stronger among people who had previously experienced a stroke, suggesting that underlying vascular disease may increase vulnerability.

Researchers concluded that improving air quality could be an important tool to prevent dementia.

How to Cope

Take steps to avoid pollution by limiting outside time when air quality is poor, and if possible, choose air filters and an air purifying system to improve the air you breathe when indoors. Consider wearing an effective face mask outdoors.

More Tips for Protecting Yourself In addition to voting for political candidates who are committed to reducing the risks posed by climate change, you can protect

your physical and mental health and minimize the health hazards you and your community face in the following ways:

Improve the Air Inside Your Home

Use a HEPA air purifier during wildfire smoke events. Keep windows closed on high-pollution days and consider upgrading your HVAC filter. Avoid burning candles or using wood stoves when outdoor air quality is poor. If possible, improve insulation and energy efficiency in your home, which can both lower utility costs and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

Rethink Transportation When You Can

Vehicle emissions are a major source of both greenhouse gases and fine particulate pollution. Walking, biking, carpooling, or using public transportation can reduce exposure to traffic-related air pollution — and improve cardiovascular health. If you're in the market for a new vehicle, electric or hybrid models may reduce tailpipe emissions, depending on your local energy grid.

Reduce Waste and Shift Food Choices

Producing and transporting food and consumer goods generates greenhouse gases. Eating more plant-based meals, wasting less food, buying fewer disposable products, and repairing or reusing items when possible can reduce environmental impact. Many of these changes — such as eating more vegetables and whole foods — also support heart and metabolic health.

Take Care of Your Mental Health The World Health Organization recognizes that climate change poses serious risks to mental health and well-being. This can include increased anxiety, depression, grief and suicidal behavior.

If you find yourself experiencing mood issues related to what's happening to our planet, a therapist or counselor, especially one with training and experience in what's called eco-anxiety and grief, can help.