

Summary for the General Public

The burning of fossil fuels produces air pollution that directly harms health. The use of fossil fuels is also the main reason that climate change is happening. While climate change is creating a health crisis that impacts everyone, there are many reasons for hope and optimism. We can solve this problem by working together.

Climate change harms the health and well-being of people across the U.S. today by increasing heart and lung disease, heat-related illness, infections, food and water problems, pregnancy complications, harms to mental health, injuries, and death.

The 2022 *Lancet* Countdown Brief for the United States focuses on four ways in which climate change can harm health.

Poor Air Quality

Burning fossil fuels creates air pollution that harms every major organ in the body, including our heart, lungs, and brain. Older adults, young children, and pregnant people are particularly at risk. Air pollution causes heart disease in adults and asthma in children. Black, African American, Latinx, Indigenous, other people of color, and low-wealth communities are disproportionately exposed to unhealthy air pollution. Reducing air pollution will improve heart and lung health.

Heat-Related Illness

Heat is the leading cause of weather-related death in the U.S. The health threats of heat-related illness are higher among children, pregnant people, older adults, and people who have existing illnesses. Specifically for children, extreme heat can harm their physical and mental health, impair their ability to learn in school, and make outdoor play less safe. Exposure to high temperatures during pregnancy is associated with poor outcomes for the baby. Those at greater risk of illness and death from heat include people who live in communities of color and low-wealth communities, and people who

work outside, are experiencing homelessness, have chronic health conditions, or are incarcerated.

Infectious Disease

Climate change is contributing to the spread of infectious diseases worldwide. Warming water temperatures can increase the transmission of waterborne diseases. More frequent and severe flooding contaminates the water we drink and swim in. Warmer temperatures and milder winters due to climate change allow ticks and mosquitoes to live longer during the year and in new parts of the country. This can increase the spread of diseases such as Lyme disease or West Nile virus infection.

Mental Health

Climate change can contribute to depression, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, grief, substance abuse, disempowerment, and hopelessness. Children, young people, and rural and Indigenous communities are at greater risk.

The Health Impacts of Climate Change are Not Experienced Equally

While climate change puts everyone at risk, policy decisions and industry actions make some communities more vulnerable to the harms of climate change and less able to cope with them. For example, policies that are shaped by systemic racism and other forms of discrimination affect which neighborhoods have polluting factories and freeways, and which have strong public transportation and green parks and trees. These decisions impact health by shaping which communities have clean air and stay cool during heat waves.

Actions You Can Take

Climate solutions are available today that will protect our health by ending our dependence on fossil fuels and slowing climate change. Rapidly transitioning to clean and renewable energy, like solar and wind, will clean our air and improve our health now while creating a safer, healthier future.

We can all take action on climate change to protect our health, the health of our children and families, and the health of our neighbors and communities. By working together to support the clean energy transition and prepare our communities to withstand climate change harms, we can save lives and protect health — now and for future generations.

Educate Yourself and Your Community

Learn how fossil fuels and climate change impact your health by seeking information from your health care provider, local health department, medical organizations, news stories about the latest scientific research, and internet resources created by universities and governmental agencies such as the **Department of Health and Human Office of Climate Change and Health Equity**.

Talk With Others

Engage with your family, friends, community members, and local officials about how fossil fuel pollution and climate change harm health. Share your concerns and invite others to share their stories. Talk with your community about climate change — ask about plans to prepare for and respond to weather emergencies made worse by climate change, such as heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, flooding, and hurricanes.

Advocate for Solutions

Work with your elected representatives to quickly move away from fossil fuel energy and transportation to clean and healthy energy. Tell your elected representatives and local officials why you care about healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities. Encourage others to join you in advocating for healthy climate solutions:

- 1. Build Clean, Healthy Energy Systems:** Quickly move away from fossil fuels and towards clean and renewable energy, like solar and wind. This will create cleaner air, slow climate change, improve health, and save lives.
- 2. Build Clean, Healthy Transportation Systems:** Healthy transportation means robust public transportation systems, neighborhoods that are safe for walking and biking, and

electric cars and buses. These changes will improve air quality, allow people to exercise as they travel, and make stronger communities that can better support their members.

- 3. End Fossil Fuel Extraction and Funding:** Ending fossil fuel extraction and stopping tax breaks to fossil fuel companies will improve health and make more funding available for clean energy. Support for fossil fuel workers and communities that rely on fossil fuels will make the clean energy transition fair for everyone.
- 4. Create Healthy, Resilient, and Equitable Communities:** Strong public health and health care systems and strong communities will improve health and prevent the worst impacts of climate change.
- 5. Support Climate Action Around the World:** Protecting our health from climate change requires that all countries take action together. Because we have contributed much more than any other nation to climate change, the U.S. should be a leader in supporting clean energy, health protections, and a move away from fossil fuels at home and in the countries most harmed by climate change.

For more information on what we can do today to protect health from climate change, read the **2022 *Lancet* Countdown U.S. Policy Brief**.

The 2022 *Lancet* Countdown Brief was developed by a diverse group of health experts from over 80 U.S. organizations who recognize that climate change is first and foremost a health crisis.