

Climate change, health, and health care

How physicians can help



Climate change leads to worsening air quality, adverse impacts on food and water supply and quality, and more frequent and extreme weather events, which all have profound impacts on human health.

Health impacts

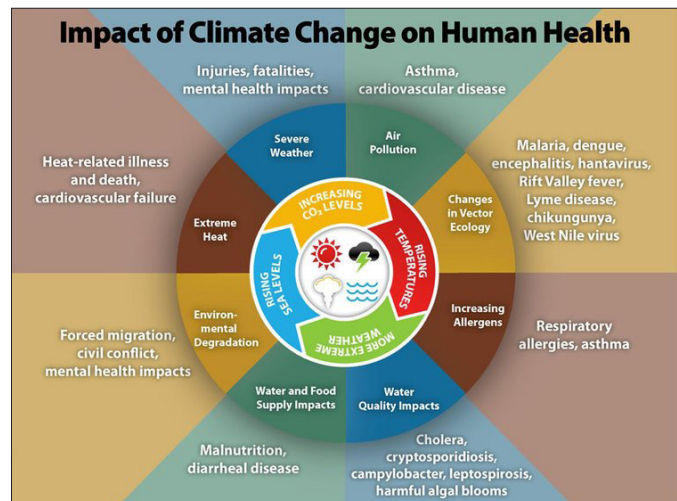
Climate change is already negatively affecting human health. Numerous medical professional societies have issued [policy statements](#) that call on their physician members to help reduce health care's carbon footprint, advocate for government policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and educate their patients and communities about climate change and health.

According to the CDC, the health effects of climate change include:

- increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease
- injuries and premature deaths related to extreme weather events
- heat-related illnesses
- changes in the prevalence and geographical distribution of food- and water-borne illnesses and vector-borne diseases
- threats to mental health
- threats to food and water security and safety

These health impacts vary depending on geographical region.

Vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted by climate change, including low-income communities and communities of color, as well as older people, children, and those with underlying health conditions. The World Health Organization estimates 80 percent of the health effects of climate change impact children under five years of age.



“Scientific surveys have shown clear evidence that our patients are facing adverse health effects associated with climate change. From heat-related injuries and forest fire air pollution, to worsening seasonal allergies and storm-related illness and injuries, it is important that we make every effort to put environmentally friendly practices in place to lessen the harmful impact that climate change is having on patient health across the globe.”

— DR. WILLARDA V. EDWARDS, AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION BOARD MEMBER

Climate change can also impact health care delivery and access. Extreme weather events can disrupt infrastructure, including utilities, transportation, and communication systems, critical to maintaining access to emergency services and health care. Hospital supply chains may also be disrupted, leading to shortages of essential pharmaceuticals and medical devices. Learn more at noharm.org/safehaven.

Reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases by transitioning to clean, renewable energy sources and sustainable transportation and agricultural systems can reduce the severity of climate change and its associated health impacts. Because the burning of fossil fuels also releases highly toxic pollutants, transitioning to clean energy improves air quality, leading to immediate health benefits for patients and communities. According to The Lancet, “Tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century.” Now is the time to act.

Health care’s impact

The health care sector has a [significant climate impact](#), producing 10 percent of the total greenhouse gases in the United States. If the U.S. health care sector were itself a country, it would rank 13th in the world for emissions, ahead of the entire United Kingdom.

Hospitals are among the most [energy-intensive buildings](#) in the country, consuming more than 10 percent of the total energy used in U.S. commercial buildings and spending more than \$8 billion on energy every year. That’s enough to cover the average salary of more than 100,000 nurses.

Climate-smart health care

With support and guidance from [Practice Greenhealth](#) and [Health Care Without Harm](#), hospitals and health systems across the country are addressing climate change as a public health issue by reducing their carbon footprint, transitioning to clean, renewable energy, and building climate-resilient facilities.

Health professionals have a tremendous opportunity to protect their patients from the impacts of climate change by working to create sustainable, [climate-smart](#) hospitals and health systems. Physicians can take action by advocating for their hospital or health system to join the [The Health Care Climate Challenge](#). The Health Care Climate Challenge mobilizes health care institutions around the globe to protect

public health from climate change and provides participants with easy-to-use resources to help support climate-smart solutions.

Physicians’ response

As trusted messengers, physicians are powerful advocates for climate solutions.

Health Care Without Harm’s [Physician Network](#) supports physician leaders in leveraging their influence and expertise to advance the growing health care sustainability movement and to create environmentally responsible, climate-smart health care.

Formed in 2017, the [Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health](#) represents over half a million physicians from leading medical societies with a mission to educate the public and policymakers about the negative health effects of climate change as well as the health benefits of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to clean, renewable energy sources.

Physician groups [across the country](#) are taking action on climate, including [Ohio Clinicians for Climate Action](#) and [Virginia Clinicians for Climate Action](#), advocating for public policies at the city, state, and federal levels that protect their patients.

Physicians are leading the way to low-carbon, resilient, and environmentally sustainable health care and protecting the health of their patients, communities, and our environment.

“The American College of Physicians urges physicians to help combat climate change by advocating for effective climate change adaptation and mitigation policies, helping to advance a low-carbon health care sector, and by educating communities about potential health dangers posed by climate change.”

— DR. WAYNE J. RILEY, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS PRESIDENT

Join the movement by signing up for the Health Care Without Harm [Physician Network](#) today.