

Global Warming and Your Health

What is global warming?

Global warming is when the Earth’s average surface temperature goes up over time. Because of this, the Earth is getting warmer with each decade. Scientists have found that this is mostly caused by human activities that affect air pollution.

When people burn fossil fuels for energy (example: driving vehicles that use gasoline), it puts gases into the air. Sometimes these gases are called greenhouse gases because having too much of them in the air causes what is called the greenhouse effect.

A greenhouse is a building where plants are grown. It usually has a glass ceiling and walls for the sun to shine through. The sun’s heat goes in through the glass more easily than it can get back out of it. This causes the temperature inside the greenhouse to get warmer than it is outside. Greenhouse gases cause global warming

by acting like the glass of a greenhouse around the Earth’s atmosphere. Adding to the problem, people also have removed a lot of the Earth’s plants that would help absorb the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide.

How will it affect my health?

Warmer average temperatures can increase the risk of health problems. Global warming will cause direct and indirect effects on health. The direct effects would be easier to see and may show up first (*Table 1*), but the indirect effects would be the most serious (*Table 2*).

What can I do to help?

About one-fifth of all greenhouse gases come from the production of food animals. Raising cows generates the most greenhouse gases. Your doctor may have talked about the health benefits of a low cholesterol diet, but reducing

Table 1. Global Warming’s Direct Health Effects

<i>Change caused by global warming</i>	<i>How this change affects health</i>	<i>Who is the most at risk?</i>
Heat waves come more often, are more severe, and last longer	Heat stress makes people sick Heat stroke can be deadly	Everyone, but especially older people and children
Average temperatures are warmer, summers last longer	Increase in infectious diseases, especially those carried by insects	Everyone, but especially people who live in countries that don’t have good public health care systems
Air pollution gets worse	More risk of heart and lung diseases, such as asthma and heart attacks	Everyone, but especially people who already have heart or lung disease
More severe storms cause flooding and damage from wind, snow, and hail	More accidents and injuries	Everyone

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Table 2. Global Warming’s Indirect Health Effects

<i>Change caused by global warming</i>	<i>How this change affects health</i>	<i>Who is the most at risk?</i>
Sea levels rise	People, property, and jobs are displaced, causing economic challenges	Everyone, but especially those living in coastal communities
Changes in temperature and precipitation that affect crops	Less food supplies, causing price increases and shortages	Everyone, but especially the poor
Changes in temperature and precipitation that cause more frequent and serious droughts	Threatened water supplies and water quality	Everyone, especially those living in areas that are already dry
Earth’s natural systems that supply clean air, clean water, and food become more stressed and may shut down in some areas	Additional risks to food and water, causing millions of people to change location, threatening global security	Everyone

global warming is another good reason to eat less meat. Most Americans eat about 12 ounces of meat per day. Try to only eat about 3 ounces of meat per day (about the size of a hamburger patty). Also make sure that less than one-half of that amount is from beef.

Another way to help is using your car less. Short car trips cause more air pollution per mile than longer trips. Instead of always driving to nearby places, try walking or biking. For information about how to ride a bicycle safely, especially in the city, go to <http://www.nhtsa.gov/Bicycles>. Start by doing this in place of one short car trip per week. Work up to replacing most of your short car trips this way. This will help create less air pollution, making the air

in your community cleaner. Also, the extra exercise could help make you healthier.

Where can I get more information?

- Environmental Protection Agency
Scientific information and helpful resources, including a link to Web site about global warming for kids
Web site: <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange>
- Meatless Monday Campaign
Recipes to help you start cutting meat out of your diet one day per week
Web site: <http://www.meatlessmonday.com>
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Bicycle safety tips
Telephone: 1-888-327-4236
Web site: <http://www.nhtsa.gov/Bicycles>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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