



Climate Change and Air Pollution

AAFP Position

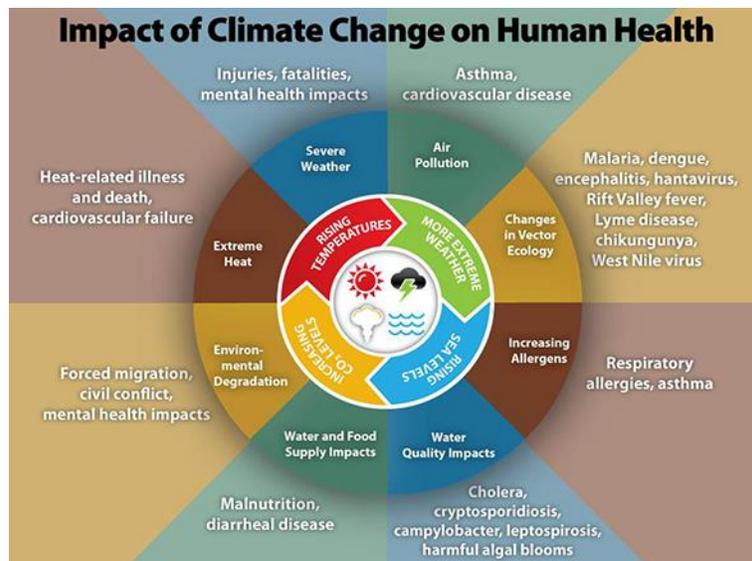
In recognition of the numerous and serious adverse health consequences resulting from pollution, greenhouse emissions from human activities, climate change, and ozone layer depletion, the AAFP recommends strong action on all public and private levels to limit and correct the pollution of our land, atmosphere and water.

What is Climate Change?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines climate change as "any significant change in the measures of climate lasting for an extended period of time." It includes major changes in temperature, precipitation, or wind patterns, as well as other effects, that occur over several decades or longer.ⁱ Conventional research indicates that changes in the Earth's temperature results from both natural and man-made causes. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, climate changes occurred due to solar energy changes, volcanic eruptions, and natural environmental changes.ⁱⁱ Research indicates that natural causes do not explain most observed warming, especially since the mid-20th century. Rather, human activities and in particular, burning fuels for energy, have been the dominant cause associated with increases in the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs).ⁱⁱⁱ

Health Impacts of Climate Change

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease and Prevention, climate change, together with other natural and human-made health stressors, influences human health and disease in numerous ways. Some existing health threats will intensify and new health threats will emerge. The health effects of these disruptions include increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease, injuries and premature deaths related to extreme weather events, changes in the prevalence and geographical distribution of food- and water-borne illnesses and other infectious diseases, and threats to mental health. The following graphic illustrates climate change's health impact.^{iv}



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Important considerations include age, economic resources, and location. In the U.S., public health can be affected by disruptions of physical, biological, and ecological systems, including disturbances originating here and elsewhere.

Physicians Can Help Raise Awareness

Over the past four decades, the AAFP has supported policy acknowledging the health impacts of air pollution and, in recent years, the need to address climate change. In 2016, the AAFP joined the Medical Society Consortium on Climate Change and Health (the Consortium), a [coalition](#) of medical associations aimed to raise awareness of climate change’s influence on patient health and safety. The Consortium brings together associations representing 500,000 clinical practitioners to carry three messages: (1) Climate change is harming Americans today and these harms will increase unless we act; (2) the way to slow or stop these harms is to decrease the use of fossil fuels, increase energy efficiency and use clean energy sources; and (3) these changes in energy choices will improve the quality of our air and water and bring immediate health benefits. According to a recent survey, two out of three physicians think climate change is relevant to patient care. The most important health issues physicians cite are poor air quality, a longer allergy season and injuries caused by storms. The Consortium seeks to organize medical professionals who wish to take action to address climate change.

Federal Climate Change Policies

United States officials have considered a range of policies to address global climate change. One of the first global agreements was the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which called on nations to reduce their GHG emission. Although no U.S. president supported the agreement, Congress has debated bipartisan bills, previous administrations established interagency commissions on climate change, and the EPA has implemented a legal mandate to regulate GHG emissions under its Clean Air Act authority. As part of that effort, the EPA put in place the Clean Power Plan which set state-by-state goals specifically meant to reduce emissions originating from power plants. The goal of this plan was to reduce the emissions of the national electricity sector by around 32 percent by 2030. This reduction is based on the national emissions from 2005. This has been rolled back by the Trump administration in October 2017 after a review was called for in April 2017.

State Policy Trends

According to the Pew Charitable Trust’s Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, states and regions have approved or considered 24 different types of policies to address climate change. Through legal actions, states have also been essential levers for advancing federal implementation efforts. In 2007 the Supreme Court ruled in *Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency* that the Clean Air Act gives the EPA the authority to regulate greenhouse gases. In 2011, the Supreme Court strengthened EPA’s authority in a decision that ruled against five utility companies in a suit brought by states and other stakeholders. Although long term changes will require both federal and global support, states will continue advancing climate change policies. Here are a few examples of major state policies accessed from the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions:

Climate Change Policy	States
Energy Wide GHG Reductions – the emission reduction levels states set out to achieve by a specified time.	20 states - AZ, CA, CO, CT, DC, FL, HI, IL, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, NH, NM, NJ, NY, OR, WA, and VT.
Climate change action plans – steps that states can take to reduce their contribution to climate change.	34 states - AZ, AK, AR, CA, CO, CT, DC, DE, FL, HI, IA, IL, KY, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, MT, NC, NH, NM, NJ, NV, NY, OR, PA, SC, UT, VA, VT, WA, and WI.
GHG Registries – a tool to measure, track, verify, and publicly report GHG emissions consistently and transparently between states.	40 states – AL, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, DC, DE, FL, GA, HI, IA, ID, IL, KS, KY, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, MT, OH, NC, NH, NM, NJ, NV, NY, OR, PA, SC, TN, UT, VA, VT, WA, WI, and WY.

ⁱ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Climate Change Basics, accessed online: https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/climatechange/climate-change-basic-information_.html

ⁱⁱ EPA, Causes of Climate Change, accessed online: https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/climate-change-science/causes-climate-change_.html

ⁱⁱⁱ EPA, Causes of Climate Change

^{iv} U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Climate and Health, accessed online: <https://www.cdc.gov/climateandhealth/effects/default.htm>