

DID YOU KNOW? ... BY TAKING ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE YOU CAN STRENGTHEN YOUR NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM

***WHO message to health ministers:** Climate change will be the defining issue for health systems in the 21st century, interacting with all social determinants of health.*

Why should health ministers care about the impacts of climate change?

- 1. Climate change will bring new health challenges and exacerbate existing ones, making it more difficult to address national health priorities.** Strong scientific evidence demonstrates the profound adverse effects that climate change will have on some of the most fundamental determinants of health, including food, air and water. Its effects are already being felt today, and will worsen over time, resulting in more severe storms, heat-waves, floods, droughts and fires, with consequent disruptions in water and food supplies and medical and other services, loss of homes and livelihoods, injuries, illnesses and deaths. Higher temperatures will change the distribution, and increase the burden, of various vector-borne, food-borne and waterborne infectious diseases.
- 2. Unless we act, climate change will widen the health equity gap within and between countries.** The effects of climate change are unevenly distributed, and are often concentrated on those who contributed least to the problem. The groups at greatest risk include the very young, elderly, and medically infirm. Low-income countries will have most difficulty adapting to climate change and related health hazards. Populations living in small-island developing states, mountainous regions, water-stressed areas, megacities and coastal areas in developing countries (particularly the large urban agglomerations in delta regions in Asia) are at greatest risk, as well as poor people and those unprotected by health services.
- 3. Vital health infrastructure and systems may be damaged or overwhelmed as a result of unmitigated climate change.** Increased frequency and severity of storms and floods, and rising sea levels, may threaten the viability of essential health infrastructure or vital surrounding services such as transport and power generation. Similarly, sudden rises in cardiovascular hospital admission rates following a heat wave, or the spread of new infectious diseases, may overwhelm national health services. Without action, the effects of climate change on health will be compounded.
- 4. The health system can protect public health from the worst effects of climate change.** Whilst urgent national and international efforts are needed to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions in the long run, adaptation measures will be needed to respond to the climate changes, which are now inevitable. Health adaptation efforts should seek to re-enforce already existing public health interventions, designed to respond to the locally specific impacts, and supported with adequate financing and infrastructure.

What can national health ministries do to respond to climate change?

- 1. Ensure that health is represented in the negotiations at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.** The global response to climate change is coordinated at the UNFCCC at

international level, and usually by an inter-sectoral committee at the national level. Discussions should cover all relevant sectors, but health is often under-represented. By participating and engaging with other government ministries responsible for these negotiations (often departments of foreign affairs, or of the environment), and participating directly, ministries of health can contribute to a more comprehensive approach to climate change, and also access the associated financial and technical support mechanisms, so as to better protect public health.

2. **Assess the national health impacts of climate change and the health system's level of preparedness.** The health impacts of climate change will be highly localised, with different risk profiles for each country and region. To this extent, a full assessment of the future risks and vulnerabilities is important for each national context.
3. **Build health considerations in to national climate change adaptation plans (NAPs).** Under the UNFCCC, countries develop, submit, and track progress of their national adaptation needs and strategies. Information about the health risks, and the corresponding public health interventions should be included in these NAPs. Technical support in developing these is available from the WHO and UNFCCC. Inclusion of health in the NAPs facilitates access to international climate finance, for eligible countries.
4. **Maximise the health benefits from climate change policies in other sectors.** Interventions designed to reduce greenhouse gases can often result in substantial health benefits. For example, in countries where solid fuels are the predominant form of household heating and cooking energy, changing to cleaner fuels and more efficient stoves will lead to cleaner air, fewer indoor pollution-related illnesses and deaths. Reductions in healthcare costs that result (i.e. reduced hospital admissions for respiratory conditions) and lost work time often matches or exceeds the costs of tackling the hazard itself. Ensuring health professionals are involved in decisions across in sectors such as agriculture, transport, housing and energy will help to maximise the potential health benefits of climate change mitigation.
5. **Lead by example by reducing the greenhouse gas emissions of the health sector.** In many high-income countries, the formal health sector is responsible for a substantial proportion of carbon emissions. For example, in 2012, the UK's National Health Service emitted 40% of England's public sector emissions ¹. The health sector can enhance its own moral authority to lead by reducing the carbon emissions of its own hospital or clinic, which often has the additional benefits of improving patient care and saving money. Six key areas to be targeted for emissions reduction include: managing energy, transport, procurement (including food), buildings and landscape, employment and skills, and community engagement.
6. **Communicate the need for a strong national response to climate change, to protect public health.** Ministries of Health can draw on their health expertise and authority to inform and influence action in key national and international processes that guide policy and resources for work on climate change. In the same way that the health community led national health communications campaigns against tobacco consumption, it can lead in communicating the need to respond to climate change.

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