



PRESS RELEASE

WHO report underlines need for stronger EU action on air pollution, says HEAL

Brussels, 3 July 2013 – A scientific review on air pollution conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) shows that the EU needs to step up efforts to improve air quality, according to the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL).

“Today’s results are a wake-up call for decision-makers in Europe to take the air pollution problem more seriously,” says Anne Stauffer, Deputy Director at the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL). *“The new findings show effects at lower concentration levels and associations with new conditions, such as diabetes, adverse birth outcomes and cognitive development. They provide evidence-based science that EU policies are inadequate.”*

WHO’s “Review of evidence on health aspects of air pollution” (REVIHAAP) project (1) provides new and more extensive evidence of harm to health in adults and children, including on prenatal development. The long-term effects on healthy adults are found to be underestimated, and diabetes has been added to the existing list of respiratory and heart disease effects in adults. The review shows additional evidence long-term impact of exposure to air pollution on respiratory health, such as asthma. Twice as many people suffer from asthma today compared to thirty years ago. For children, the report also highlights new and worrying impacts on neurodevelopment and cognitive function, and adverse effects in birth outcomes of babies born to exposed mothers.

The scientists also say that the effects of very hot periods during the summer - associated with climate change in Europe - will make the effects of air pollution worse.

The assessment, carried out by 60 leading international scientists in the field, forms part of the discussions on future EU measures in the EU Year of Air 2013. The findings prompted the scientists to recommend a review of existing WHO guidelines. They also say that the “newfound health effects call for stronger EU air policies”, and that EU ambient air quality standards should be revised.

The findings come at an important moment. This autumn will see the launch of proposals on how to improve air quality all over Europe. HEAL calls on the EU Commission, but especially EU member states to increase their political commitment to tackling air pollution, which causes more premature death in Europe than road accidents. (2)

The project reviewed new studies on how particulate matter, ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and other pollutants harm our health. On particulate matter (PM) it showed more evidence on both short and long-term effects and greater damage at lower levels.

Studies on nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) also produced new evidence of long-term effects, including harm to health at levels below existing EU limit values. It found that even for healthy and mildly asthmatic people there were small effects on inflammation and airway responsiveness. Such changes would not

be detected by clinical doctors but the consequences for the entire population, including people with existing respiratory and heart problems, would be significant.

The research on ozone provided more evidence on short and long-term effects, and suggested effects on cognitive development in children, reproductive health and pre-term births.

“Air pollution is a top health and environmental problem in Europe, and its health costs but also economic productivity losses are significant. This autumn, Europe’s decision-makers have the unique opportunity to bring down harmful emissions and make everyone breathe easier. The top priority is to agree on measures that are far-reaching and ambitious enough to achieve major decreases of air pollution. This includes a National Emissions Ceilings Directive which goes beyond what has been agreed on in the revised Gothenburg protocol.”

Over 60 health and environmental groups recently launched their three priorities for the review of EU air policies. These are: strong emissions reductions across the board in the National Emissions Ceilings Directive; achieving emission reductions in all sectors, also those that are currently unregulated; and a strengthening and further enforcement of the EU ambient air quality standards (3).

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Notes

1. REVIHAAP Technical report:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/environment-and-health/air-quality/publications/2013/review-of-evidence-on-health-aspects-of-air-pollution-revihaap-project-final-technical-report>

2. The Global Burden of Disease Study 2013 showed exposure to air quality was associated with over 430,000 premature deaths (2010 figures) <http://www.env-health.org/resources/press-releases/article/air-pollution-ranked-as-top-health> In 2011, more than 30,000 people died on the roads of the European Union - http://ec.europa.eu/transport/road_safety/specialist/statistics/ For UK, Massachusetts Institute of Technology research, “Researchers find car exhaust causes more premature deaths than road accidents”, <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2012/air-pollution-deaths-united-kingdom-0420.html>

3. NGO priorities for the review of the Thematic Strategy on Air Pollution: <http://www.env-health.org/resources/position-papers/article/joint-position-paper-ngo>

HEAL is a leading European not-for-profit organization addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union. With the support of its more than 65 member organizations, which represent health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, patients, citizens, women, youth, and environmental experts, HEAL brings independent expertise and evidence from the health community to different decision-making processes. Members include international and Europe-wide organisations as well as national and local groups. Website: www.env-health.org