

Public health & climate change

“Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time. Climate change will affect, in profoundly adverse ways, some of the most fundamental determinants of health: food, air, water.”

Dr Margaret Chan,

Director-General, World Health Organization, on World Health Day, 7 April 2008.

“Everyone working in the European health sector has an opportunity to take action to ‘health-proof’ climate change.”

Génon Jensen,

Executive Director, Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)



Health proofing climate change

The Health and Environment Alliance's "Health Proofing Climate Change" campaign aims to put health at the centre of a strong climate change policy across Europe in preparation for the global climate change negotiations in Denmark in 2009.

The World Health Organization, HEAL, and the network of European local and regional health authorities known as EUREGHA would like to enable public health professionals to take a leadership role in advocating for the personal and policy changes needed for a more sustainable future.

"The World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe develops tools and methods to stand up to the challenge of protecting health from climate change, working side by side with our Member States to implement measures that protect health, and support the health sector in taking the lead to promote climate change policies and actions that are beneficial to health."

Bettina Menne, World Health Organisation (WHO)
Regional Office for Europe

Action would involve calling for increased capacity and resources for initiatives such as investment in renewable energy sources and rethinking current approaches to health sector transport.

"We now know the changes that are needed within the health sector to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions while achieving improvements in staff morale, more active lives and even financial savings. The next step is to ensure these approaches become widely known and effectively adopted so that policy makers have the courage to set and support higher targets and stricter timetables on climate change."

Génon Jensen, Executive Director,
Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)

"Today we face environmental challenges of unprecedented magnitude. In the fight against climate change, regional and local health authorities can spur positive change. Commitment at the regional level aiming at introducing innovative and cost-effective solutions to environmental problems can promote public health, reduce carbon emissions, and reduce costs at one time. Think Health Globally, Act Locally! "

Francesco Ronfini, European REGIONal and Local Health
Authorities (EUREGHA)

Climate change approaches that benefit health

Much of the debate over climate change misses an important, basic point: **the same activities that will eventually threaten the earth's climate also threaten human health today.** The burning of fossil fuels produces greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change but it also produces health-damaging particles and other air pollutants. Greater use of renewable energy would result in immediate health benefits from reduced air pollution.

Decreasing greenhouse gas emissions through reductions in personal car use would prompt more walking and cycling. Healthier and more sustainable approaches to transport would have many beneficial effects for health, including stimulating more exercise. This would in turn help reduce obesity, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases, which are amongst the greatest contributors to mortality and morbidity in Europe.

How can Europe health-proof climate change?

Many governments have already started to take action on climate change. Sixteen EU countries have set up early warning systems for heat waves and 10 have associated action plans. Many regional and local health authorities and hospitals have set up their own innovative schemes.

Those involved in work on health proofing climate change recognise that it requires cross-sector, interdisciplinary partnerships to share best practice and introduce visionary plans for a more sustainable future.

A competition to highlight the best adaptation and mitigation practices within the health sector in Europe has shown how climate change initiatives are contributing to improvements in public health. Jointly organised by HEAL and EUREGHA, the results are available at www.env-health following award presentations in Brussels in June 2008.

The role of health professionals

Those in the health care sector represent a respected and influential group, which makes them well placed to take a leadership role among peers, patients and citizens, and prompts governments listen to them.

Some health professional groups in Europe have taken a lead in collective advocacy. For example, the Climate and Health Council is helping to exert pressure on the UK government and the international community to tighten legislation and support environmental developments. Many prestigious institutions and individuals have signed up to the "Declaration of the Climate and Health Council".

What needs to be done now?

HEAL recommends that:

- Health professionals and others in the health sector become champions of the need for a cut of at least 30% in the EU's domestic emissions of greenhouse gases by 2020. This measure should include an effective compliance mechanism to ensure that Member States meet their emission reduction commitments.
- Examples of "good practices" in public health and climate change should be widely shared
- National and regional websites on climate change should provide useful information for the health sector on sustainable solutions for public health and climate change
- Key facts on health and climate change should be made available to every health care region, hospital, health centre, and doctor in the European Union.

Useful publications

"Sustaining a healthy future: Taking action on climate change", UK Faculty of Public Health booklet, January 2008.

"Taking the temperature: Towards an NHS response to global warming", National Health Service (NHS), UK, 2007.

"Protecting health in Europe from climate change", Bettina Menne et al, World Health Organization (WHO), May 2008.

"Climate change and health", seminar report for journalists, World Health Communication Associates (WHCA), January 2008.

"The climate change and renewable energy strategy", European Commission, January 2008.

"Climate change and health: Protecting the most vulnerable", HEAL briefing, October 2007. Available at www.env-health.org/r/93



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Five ways to make a difference

Each health authority should ask themselves the following questions:

- **Leadership:** Has your board discussed climate change and begun a programme to encourage all staff to talk to each other, patients and the community about the benefits of a healthy, low-carbon lifestyle? Health staff should be as comfortable offering advice on reducing private car use (to encourage physical activity) as on giving up smoking.
- **Strategy:** Does your local authority have a climate change strategy, an action plan and the capacity to adapt?
- **Targets:** Is your organisation meeting the mandatory targets for reductions in energy consumption and increasing the energy efficiency of buildings?
- **Partnership:** Are you working collaboratively on tackling climate change with local and specialist organisations?
- **Energy:** How much did your organisation spend on energy last year, and what proportion of “green” electricity was procured?

Adapted from “Sustaining a healthy future: Taking action on climate change”, UK Faculty of Public Health and “Taking the temperature: towards an NHS response to global warming”.