

Experts warn of serious health impacts from climate change for pregnant women, children, and older people

5 June 2024 - Pregnant women, newborns, children, adolescents and older people are facing serious health complications due to climate change, according to a new collection of papers published in the Journal of Global Health, and yet the specific needs of these groups have been largely neglected in the climate response.

The articles document the available scientific evidence on the health impacts of different climate hazards at key life stages, from heatwaves to air pollution and natural disasters like wildfires and flooding. Together, they show that climate-related health risks have been crucially underestimated for younger and older people and during pregnancy, with serious, often life-threatening implications.

Taking extreme heat as an example, the authors note that preterm births – the leading cause of childhood deaths – spike during heatwaves, while older people are more likely to suffer heart attacks or respiratory distress. Each additional 1°C in minimum daily temperature over 23.9°C has been shown to increase the risk of infant mortality by as much as 22.4%.

“These studies show clearly that climate change is not a distant health threat, and that certain populations are already paying a high price,” said Dr Anshu Banerjee, Director of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health and Ageing at the World Health Organization (WHO). “While awareness of climate change has increased, actions to safeguard the lives of those at most risk has barely scratched the surface of what’s needed. For climate justice to be achieved, this must be urgently redressed.”

Authored by experts from WHO and academics from around the world, the collection, titled Climate change across the lifecourse, reports a number of specific physical and mental health impacts that arise due to different climate hazards. For example:

- High temperatures are associated with adverse birth outcomes, primarily preterm birth and stillbirth, as well as hypertension and gestational diabetes in pregnancy. Heatwaves affect cognitive function and therefore learning for children and adolescents, while increasing heart attacks and respiratory complications among older people.
- Ambient air pollution increases the likelihood of high blood pressure during pregnancy, low birth weight, preterm birth, and negative impacts on foetal brain and lung development. It raises risk of respiratory illness among children and older people, who also face greater risks of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and pneumonia.
- Climate-related natural disasters have significant mental and physical health impacts. Flooding and drought reduce access to safe water and food supplies, increasing diarrhoeal diseases and malnutrition. Wildfires have been shown to increase respiratory disorders and cardiovascular mortality rates for older people.
- While climate change affects everyone, climate-related displacements and disruptions have severe consequences for those needing regular access to health services and social support. Infants and older people as well as pregnant women may have particular physiological risk factors, such as difficulties with temperature regulation, vulnerability to dehydration, and/or weaker immune systems. They also face disproportionate impacts from the indirect effects of climate change and related disasters, like food and water shortages and spikes in vector and water-borne diseases.

“A healthy environment underpins health throughout life, enabling healthy growth and development in childhood and adolescence, healthy pregnancies and healthy ageing,” said Anayda Portela, Scientist at WHO and an author on the papers. “There is an urgent need to mitigate climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to build climate resilience; to take specific actions that protect health at these various life stages, and to ensure continuity of health services for those most at risk when climate disasters occur.”

By documenting the health impacts of different climate hazards for particular populations, the researchers aim to help governments and programmes address risks and plan to take action. Currently, few climate adaptation measures are tailored for the specific needs of women, infants, children and adolescents, the authors note, as well as older people who may have mobility and cognitive constraints. Measures should include preparing childcare, social care and educational systems for extreme weather events and rising temperatures, the articles note, as well as engaging people of all ages in climate action, dialogue, and planning.

2023 was the warmest year on record in over 170 years, and there were multiple climate emergencies from wildfires to cyclones, flooding, and extreme heat.

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