

Climate Impacts and Health Co-Benefits

On the eve of the United Nations Climate Summit, the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), the Public Health Institute (PHI), The Global Climate and Health Alliance, and Institutes of the University of Wisconsin-Madison mobilized world health leaders to stimulate conversation around climate change and health.

A global forum, the *Civil Society Event on Action in Climate Change and Health* highlighted public health impacts of climate change across the non-health sectors of agriculture and food, transportation and community design, and energy and air pollution. Panelists sounded the call for urgent mitigation of factors that negatively impact health, including:

- physical inactivity
- lack of infrastructure support for biking, walking and health-enabling environments in congested cities
- greenhouse gas emissions contributing to carbon-intensive diets and food insecurity
- malnutrition
- rising rates of obesity
- chronic diseases
- temperature rises contributing to vector and water-borne diseases from climate swerves and extreme events

This event created a shared vision around how the co-benefits of health across the agriculture, transportation and energy sectors can mitigate risks and create opportunities that drive:

- food and nutrition security
- healthier diets
- increased physical activity
- designing cities for active transportation
- building resilient communities that improve health equity

By making health the focus of decision-making around climate change, progress can be made toward combating political inertia and climate skepticism to create new ways of building support.. It also drives real solutions for achieving human health, well-being and sustainable development.

Presenters, featured speakers & special guests

- **Richard Horton**, FRCP, FRCPC, FMedSci, editor-in-chief, *The Lancet*
- **Diarmid Campbell-Lendrum**, climate and health team leader, the World Health Organization
- **Luiz Galvao**, representing the Pan American Health Organization Climate Team
- **John Balbus**, M.D., M.P.H. senior advisor for public health to the director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS)
- **Jonathan Patz**, M.D., MPH, professor and director of the Global Health Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, lead author of JAMA article - *Climate Change: Challenges and Opportunities for Global Health*

- **Rear Admiral Boris D. Lushniak**, M.D., MPH, acting surgeon general of the United States
- **Gina McCarthy**, EPA administrator
- **Maria Neira**, M.D., director, World Health Organization Department of Public Health and Social Determinants of Health
- **Asterio Takesy**, ambassador to the United States from the Federated States of Micronesia
- **Dr. Donna Shalala**, former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services

PANEL DISCUSSION: Diet for a Sustainable Planet: Reimagining Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Amidst Climate Change

*Moderator: Linda Rudolph, M.D. MPH, co-director, Center for Climate Change & Health, Public Health Institute
Gunhild Stordalen, M.D., Ph.D., co-funder & co-chair, Stordalen Foundation, Funder & co-chair, GreeNudge, and
funder & director, EAT Initiative*

Alessandro Demaio, M.D., MPH, founder and director, NCD Free

*Sir Andy Haines, Ph.D., professor of Public Health and Primary Care at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical
Medicine*

*Mark Holderness, executive secretary of Global Forum on Agriculture Research (GFAR), board chair, World Vegetable
Center*

*Cristina Tirado, DVM, M.S., Ph.D., moderator of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition Working Group on Climate,
chair of International Union of Nutritional Sciences task force for Climate and Nutrition and affiliated with UCLA
Institute of Environment and Sustainability*

Presenters called for systems-thinking around the climate-agriculture-health relationship and creating a more sustainable growth paradigm that defines what a healthy food system is and what makes up a healthy diet that is culturally sensitive. To achieve behavior change at a population level, aligning health and sustainability agendas is necessary.

Recommendations

- Foster recognition that 1.) the links between agriculture, health and sustainability are cross-cutting and 2.) inter-connected solutions that increase the resiliency of food systems and people's health are twin goals critical for mitigating food insecurity and advancing healthy diets.
- Finance and promote projects that combine interdisciplinary, behavioral research and integrated metrics that can improve crop yield, sustainable practices, access to food and healthy diets.
- Develop career pathways that allow people to cross over between agriculture and health to create a cross-cultural understanding of climate and health risk mitigation and adaptation strategies. This is especially important in ensuring that climate change adaptations do not undermine peoples' ability to feed themselves, giving special attention to rural communities, women and children.
- Mobilize systems-thinking by the health care sector around messages and policy actions that can empower communities to act, and government and the private sector to make investments that realize health gains.

PANEL DISCUSSION: Sustainable Communities, Active Lives: Active Transportation and Urban Design

Moderator: Janet Rankin, Ph.D., professor, Dept. of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise, Virginia Tech

Boris Lushniak, M.D., MPH, acting U.S. surgeon general

Andy Clarke, president, League of American Bicyclists

Carlos Dora, M.D., Ph.D., coordinator, WHO, Dept. Of Public Health and Social Determinants of Health

Jim Sallis, Ph.D., director, Active Living Research

A central message during this panel discussion was the need for a paradigm shift at national and local levels in urban planning, land use and transportation policies. This will achieve global opportunities to prevent NCDs, improve health and create low-carbon environments that drive socio-economic and environmental sustainability. We can improve not only air quality, but quality of life and overall well-being when individuals walk rather than drive, cities and counties design and make investments in walking paths, bikeways, parks, open spaces and public transit, and development projects incorporate healthy components in community design. The co-benefits of health through active transportation policies translate into healthy, happy and prosperous communities.

Recommendations

- Prioritize physical activity as a public health policy across housing, transportation, energy and urban planning sectors across global, national and local levels.
- Reframe physical activity messaging so that it is motivating and conveys the importance to overall health. Specifically helping individuals understand that daily exercise should be a priority, the real benefit is feeling better and it is a community and social responsibility.
- Advocate integration of the climate change, health and sustainability global agendas and linking active transport and air pollution together as an equity issue.
- Change transportation goals by calling on national leaders and mayors to design activity-friendly cities by shifting funding investments to public transit and increasing biking and walking pathways; and, specifically in the U.S., advocating changes to zoning laws to have mixed use and higher density development.
- Develop health and sustainable development targets for active transport and health economic assessment tools for walking and cycling.
- Bolster active transportation research around the co-benefits of health.
- Support active transportation networks by raising awareness, through training programs and with local community interventions.

PANEL DISCUSSION: Clearing the Air: The Health and Climate Benefits of Cleaner Energy

Moderator: Josh Karliner, international team coordinator and director of global projects for Healthcare Without Harm

Jacqueline Patterson, M.A., MPH, director of the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program

Maria Neira, director, WHO Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health

Genon Jensen, executive director, Health and Environmental Alliance

This panel discussion focused on clean air and energy production in the developed world and emerging economies. Key concepts included intergenerational equity, the call for the health sector to be messengers for action on climate change and the power of the “disinvest to invest” ethic in moving away from fossil fuel dependency.

Panelists discussed organizing major disease-focused, nonprofit associations, medical societies and health professionals to communicate the public health impacts of coal-fired power plants. There are also opportunities for those groups to lobby both energy producers and governments to stop investing in new coal-powered plants.

Recommendations

- Foster alignment between environment, health and sustainability goals in all policies to promote greening of the health sector and to lead by example in promoting sustainable energy.
- Advocate an end to fossil fuel subsidies and target political dollars into renewables and health resiliency.
- Champion the health care sector to minimize its carbon footprint by disinvesting from fossil fuels and make healthy green-building practices a shared goal in health care construction.
- Educate health care professionals about ways to speak up as trusted members of society on health benefits of climate change.
- Engage new constituencies, such as faith and youth communities, in looking at climate change as a human rights and social justice issue.
- Promote development of a health economic tool to measure the impact of health co-benefits of climate change action on energy equity.

Summary

In closing out the event, Sir Andy Haines reflected on learnings from the day. He summarized Richard Horton's remarks stating that if we undermine the foundations of nature, we undermine the health of civilizations. If we ignore action on climate change, we are pursuing an unethical experiment on the planet and the people suffering the most and who have the least adaptive capacity. the poor. Haines noted that, currently, we are subsidizing the destruction of our future and that just telling people that things are disastrous does not provide the motivation for change. He underscored that it is important to act now on climate change to lessen greenhouse gas emissions and not pass on costs to future generations.

Haines summarized a series of compelling insights from the panel discussions:

1. Getting our own house in order is critical.
 - a. Health professionals can be very influential, as people are concerned about their own health. Society and policymakers trust messaging delivered by health professionals.
 - b. Ensuring our health systems have minimal environmental impact shows that we lead by example and are committed to reducing the squandering of resources that lead to ill-health.
 - c. Having a strategy of involving each health specialty in its own way to create collaborative alliances around its strengths and across sectors that help health professionals move beyond siloes to influence policy.
2. Quality research on health impacts of climate change and health co-benefits is needed, especially that which pays attention to issues of health equity and the social, economic and environmental determinants of health in driving interventions and best practices,
3. Need to recognize that cities are a crucial battleground for driving change, as that is where populations are growing. Working intersectorally with city planners, transport engineers, housing developers and others at community and national levels should be part of any public health disease prevention strategy.
4. Communicating the positive vision of health should be part of the ethic that influences national, regional and local decision-making around climate change and health.
5. Policy actions should be universal, appropriate, equitable and include:
 - a. Advocating for low-carbon environment and energy systems that promote sustainable agriculture, active transport and innovative technologies that can reduce emissions from carbon fuels.
 - b. Divestiture of the health care sector from reliance on fossil fuels.
 - c. Ensuring indicators in the Climate Change Framework and Sustainable Development Goals reflect both health and sustainability.
 - d. Ensuring the healthy and sustainable choice is the easy and convenient choice
 - e. Linking advocacy movements around a health and human rights ethic
 - f. Ensuring that where economic growth does happen it is pro-health, pro-environment and pro-poor.
6. Building alliances among youth is important as they are the generation of the future.
7. Educating our constituencies about the intersection of climate change, health and the economy is important to empowering positive leadership and engagement around a shared vision. This can unify the field, create champions and can facilitate change that will shift current trajectories.

During a dialogue session, attendees shared thoughts on next steps and areas of emphasis to build on over the next 12 months. They concurred that:

- Health is a catalyst and provides a framework for climate change action. It is important to mobilize health care professionals in support of actions across sectors that impact public health.
- Climate change is a crisis. Framing the climate crisis in terms of improvements to health and well-being simplifies the climate issue and allows people and policymakers to leapfrog the complexity of climate change science and skepticism by putting a human face on both the problem and solution.
- There is tremendous power in creating small changes at the community level. Activating academics to advance research on the co-benefits of health across agriculture, transportation and energy sectors is needed, as well as developing the metrics to measure impact and change.
- Creating engagement workshops around active transport with city administrators, our own constituencies, partnering organizations and community activists is an enabling action that is critical to broadening understanding of how others have achieved activity-friendly cities and unlocked investments.
- The framework for the Climate Change Convention and Sustainable Development agenda, together with the UN Habitat Conference, offers opportunities to make health an overarching goal and to let the health voice be heard.
- It is important to recognize the urgency of championing divestiture of fossil fuel assets in the health care sector and step up engagement with Congress in passing a fee on carbon emissions and providing incentives for taking action on climate change.
- Work with the private sector on innovative technologies that can reduce climate health risks across sectors.
- Supporting Micronesia's amendment to phase down HFCs as part of the Montreal Protocol can advance the strengthening of health and the environment in small island nations.
- Health professionals can play a leadership role in the political debate regarding the urgency of acting on climate change and creating a positive vision for health equity and our future by creating health care, community, youth, industry and political champions.

Event Webcast

The event proceedings are now available to watch online. Be sure to watch for the conclusions and key directions. You may view individual sessions via the video home page menu or the session links below.

[Access the video home page menu](#) or individual sessions here (Note: you will need to register one time for each video):

Session 1: [Overview of the Health Risks of Climate Change](#)

Session 2: [Panel: Diet for Sustainable Planet: Reimagining Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition Amidst Climate Change](#)

Session 3: [Panel: Sustainable Communities, Active Lives: Active Transportation and Urban Design](#)

Session 4: [Panel: Clearing The Air: The Health and Climate Benefits of Cleaner Energy](#)

Session 5: [Closing Keynote & Summary of the Day](#)

Session 6: [Interactive Session: Catalyzing Action: Putting Health at The Center of Addressing Climate Change](#)

Get Involved

Join ACSM's new [ActivEarth initiative](#) that was announced at the event. If you're passionate about physical activity and share the ActivEarth vision to strengthen the environment and the economy through active transportation, you can [sign up as an organizational partner, assist with program development and receive updates](#).

We invite those of you working in the US health or public health sector to join the US Climate and Health Alliance, a network dedicated to addressing the threats of climate change to health by activating and amplifying the voices of public health and health care workers and professionals. [Learn more, and join to get involved](#).

And if you are working globally and/or outside the US, we encourage you to have your organization sign the Doha Declaration on Climate, Health and Well Being, and to attend the Climate and Health Summit 2014: Investing in Health next month in Lima, Peru. [Learn more here](#).

Thanks for your commitment to improving health wherever your steps take you!