Climate Change and Health
Health Professionals Joint Call for Action

Health professional groups recognise human-caused climate change as an increasingly serious and urgent threat to health and health equity in New Zealand and worldwide. In contrast, rapid and effective action on climate change represents an important opportunity to improve health, by avoiding negative health impacts and by realising significant health and equity co-benefits from well-designed climate policies.

We note that globally:

- Climate change is already contributing to global disease, disability and premature death – most seriously affecting people in poor countries, and the poorest within all countries.

We note that health threats for New Zealand include:

- Direct impacts – e.g. from high temperatures and other extreme weather events such as storms, floods and droughts, causing illness and injuries.

- Biologically-mediated impacts – e.g. changing patterns of infectious disease, global rises in food prices impacting on New Zealanders’ nutrition.

- Socially-mediated impacts – e.g. loss of livelihoods, forced migration, economic vulnerability and increased risks of conflict.

We note opportunities for health through climate action, including:

- More walking, cycling and public transport reduces greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, increases physical activity, and can reduce health-damaging air pollution and road traffic injuries.

- Healthy food production and diets that include more plants and fewer animal products could reduce agricultural GHG emissions, while improving freshwater quality, and reducing cancer and heart disease.

- Improving housing (e.g. insulation) reduces illnesses associated with cold, damp home environments, and also cuts GHG emissions from home heating.

These health co-benefits could reduce the burden of ill-health from the leading causes of death and illness in New Zealand, such as cardiovascular disease, cancers, obesity and diabetes, with large cost savings to the health sector. These direct benefits, along with indirect benefits from increased productivity of a healthier population, would help offset the early costs of addressing climate change.
We recognise that:

• Levels of health risk posed by climate change vary according to age, ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.

• Those at highest health risk from climate change in New Zealand include Māori, Pacific peoples, children, elderly and low income people.

• Measures to address climate change have the potential to widen or reduce existing health inequities, depending on design and implementation.

• No country can solve climate change singlehandedly. Without taking rapid and sufficient action itself, New Zealand cannot effectively press for global emissions reductions.

Our vision is:

• A just transition to healthy people living in a healthy climate.

As health professional organisations we call for:

• A rapid, whole-of-society, transition to a net-zero GHG-emitting nation, which is based in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and designed to make the most of opportunities for health and creating a fairer society.

• A national emissions reduction target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. Different gases have different roles in this target, consistent with IPCC evidence about the role of long- and short-lived gases in the atmosphere and ocean and in achieving substantial reductions in the crucial next decade.

• This target needs to be accompanied by robust interim targets and emissions budgets that fairly share the global emissions budget, with transparent, responsive monitoring of progress.

• Health sector planning to prepare for the locked-in health impacts of climate change, and rapidly adapting to a net-zero emissions future.

• Measures that prioritise and protect groups likely to be worst affected - Māori, Pacific peoples, children, elderly, and low income people.

• GHG emissions to be a key performance indicator for health sector organisations.

• Health (including equity) Impact Assessment (HIA) to be routinely undertaken to inform key climate-relevant policies.

• New Zealand to demonstrate leadership in promoting effective and fair global action to reduce GHG emissions.

• New Zealand to demonstrate leadership in protecting health from climate change in the climate-vulnerable Pacific region.
This call for action is supported by:

References


McCoy D, Montgomery H, Sabaratnam A, Godlee F. Climate change and human survival. BMJ. 2014;348:g2351. http://www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.g2351


