

# CLIMATE

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## What You Should Know

**Climate change is the most significant health threat facing humanity.** Climate change undermines the foundations of health, from clean air and water to nutritious food and shelter. It leads to wide-ranging health impacts, including injury and death from extreme weather events, malnutrition, and mental health deterioration, as well as causes a greater burden of noncommunicable and communicable diseases.<sup>1</sup>

**Climate change enhances pandemic risk.** Most emerging infectious diseases are the result of spillover of pathogens from animals to people. Examples of emerging infectious diseases with such zoonotic origins include HIV infection, Ebola virus disease,

and monkeypox.<sup>2,3</sup> Warming and land use change, especially deforestation, contribute to interspecies contact that increase the risk of such spillover events and future pandemics.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Climate change drives and exacerbates health inequities.** The health impacts of climate change are disproportionately felt by those who contributed the least to the issue: people living in low-income countries and communities.<sup>6</sup> These individuals bear the brunt of harms from extreme weather events, have higher rates of chronic illnesses due to exposure to fossil fuel pollutants, and are more likely to live in emerging infectious disease hotspots.

## Congressional Calls to Action

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### **Invest in climate-resilient health systems and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) at the federal and global level.**

Support healthcare facilities to protect their operations as they often serve as linchpins during and after extreme weather events. These facilities also require sustainable WASH access to slow the spread of outbreaks, like flu or Ebola. With support, healthcare facilities can take preventive steps to keep vulnerable communities safe, which also protects Americans from health threats.

### **Support policies and legislation that help conserve tropical and sub-tropical forests.**

These forests sequester about 25% of the world's carbon and also serve as a buffer against infectious diseases. Well-designed forest conservation can reduce the risk of zoonotic spillover of viruses from wildlife into people. By adopting sound legislation, such as AMAZON21, the U.S. government can help mitigate climate change and prevent future pandemics.

### **Support the transition away from fossil fuel reliance.**

Reduced fossil fuel combustion for transportation, electricity, and heat<sup>7</sup> can significantly improve health, particularly by lowering greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and reducing air pollution. Valuation of GHG emissions, like the social cost of carbon, and costs associated with traditional air pollutants, like particulate matter, must include the value of their negative health impacts.

## Why is this investment important?

The World Health Organization estimates that over 13 million people die globally each year due to avoidable environmental causes.<sup>8</sup> Addressing climate change represents an unprecedented opportunity to safeguard human health, including through decreasing the risk of future pandemics.

Meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement could save approximately one million lives per year worldwide by 2050 through reductions in air pollution alone.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. has a crucial role to champion these gains, and the U.S. government aims to reduce national emissions from 2005 levels by 50-52% by 2030.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, achieving greater health equity requires climate action. The U.S. government is committed to

ensuring at least 40% of the benefits from climate and clean energy investments benefit under-resourced communities and the U.S. Agency for International Development has set up multiple programs focused on helping vulnerable populations adapt to climate change.

Despite the U.S. government's current efforts, enormous opportunities remain to reduce fossil fuel use, curb deforestation, and strengthen water resource management. This can safeguard American health and promote health equity, while simultaneously mitigating climate change and lowering the odds of future pandemics.



Achieving greater health equity requires climate action.

## Resources

Climate Change and Health (WHO): <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

COP24 Special Report on Health and Climate Change (WHO): <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/cop24-special-report-health-climate-change>

Lancet Countdown—2021 Policy brief for the United States on health and climate change: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/n2bmdt74fiw0xgu/USA%202021%20English%20-%20Lancet%20Countdown%20Policy%20Brief.pdf?dl=0>

“Call for Emergency Action to Limit Global Temperature Increases, Restore Biodiversity, and Protect Health.” (New England Journal of Medicine): <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe2113200>

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